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GROWING WEST: AMERICAN BOYHOOD AND THE FRONTIER NARRATIVE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines how frontier narratives interacted with discourses of American boyhood to establish and inform notions of race, gender, and national identity in the second half of the nineteenth century. A rich academic conversation exists exploring connections between the mythic power of the American frontier and nineteenth century constructions of hegemonic masculinity; this project adds to that conversation by considering the dynamic relationship between frontier narratives and boyhood. This is a cultural history, assessing prominent nineteenth century cultural forms, such as the dime novel and the Wild West show, through the vivid interplay of frontier mythos and boyhood. Through this interplay, these cultural forms brought together late nineteenth century notions of child development, history, and frontier mythology to tell powerful stories about America's past and create hopeful visions of its future.

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Introduction

“Go West young man, and grow up with the country.”

On July 13, 1865, Horace Greeley published these famous words in a *New York Tribune* editorial. Like much in the history of the West, the authorship of the credo remains in dispute, and, like much of the history of the West, that dispute hardly seems to matter.¹ As reporter Maxwell Scott says at the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a film that offers as persuasive an analysis as any of the relationship between myth and history in American frontier culture; “This is the West, sir. When legend becomes fact, print the legend.” Greeley’s legendary utterance is now fact, and since the publication of that *Tribune* editorial, the motto has served as the title for three feature films, a Bing Crosby album, and countless newspaper headlines.

The quotation also serves as a useful frame for this project. In the second half of the nineteenth century, America completed the final stages of westward migration, fulfilling the promise of manifest destiny and beginning to come to terms with the idea that the frontier was closed, and with it a defining chapter in American history.² As Greeley’s quote suggests, the frontier has become synonymous with a distinctive type of frontier masculinity, a type of masculinity that, in fact, has come to represent much of the national character. The iconography of frontier manhood is pervasive and longstanding, bridging the centuries and including larger than life figures such as John Wayne, the Marlboro Man, and a series of cowboy presidents like Teddy Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. Wedding strong character to feisty individualism, these men represent a powerful, and persuasive, vision of American ethos, formed, like the nation itself, through exposure to the open—and wild—West.

Ideas of youth play a prominent role in this mythologizing of the West, a role current scholarship has largely failed to account for. Greeley's quote exhorts "young men" to head west, and, importantly, it frames that journey in the language of development. In the space of the frontier, boys will grow into men, just as the fledgling nation will grow to fulfill its promise. Imagining the West as a literal and metaphorical space for development and progress, nineteenth century writers and thinkers, like Greeley, drew on distinctive ideologies of race and gender. Spreading civilization westward intensified the influence of white, masculine hegemony through occupation of the "open" frontier. Greeley's quote tells a story about that process, one that became increasingly influential in the second half of the nineteenth century. This project revisits that story, examining how discourses of American boyhood and frontier mythology worked through and against each other in literature and performance to shape late nineteenth century ideas of national character, identity, and progress.

American history is steeped in a long-standing national fascination with the landscape, both real and imagined, of the frontier. Prominent New World intellectuals, from St. John de Crèvecoeur and Benjamin Franklin before the American Revolution to Thomas Jefferson after it, used the potent signifier of "unspoiled land" in the West to imagine and mediate a number of disparate visions for America's future. These visions were predicated on the acquisition and development of the land. For Jefferson, this project took shape most prominently in the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis & Clark Expedition. John Jacob Astor sought to establish trade routes from Oregon to Asia alongside the contemporaneous drive to establish the Oregon Trail in the first decades of the nineteenth century. And, of course, the promise of the untapped West formed the

impetus for the shared dream of a North American transcontinental railway, finally realized by the establishment of the Pacific Railroad in 1869.

In each of these instances, visions of the West drew on the idea of unspoiled land to weave complex, often contradictory, narratives of America's past and future. As Henry Nash Smith smartly concludes, the importance of the Lewis and Clark expedition "lay on the level of the imagination: it was drama. It was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future" (18). It's been over 200 years since Lewis and Clark headed west, and the myth of the frontier continues to dominate the American imagination. In those two hundred years, this myth has often been articulated through a set of powerful and durable themes. As Richard Slotkin describes it, America has developed a dominant "myth-historiography," one in which "the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization" (10).

As Annette Kolodny points out, this mythology has long been clearly gendered. The idea of open land, she argues, is "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy," specifically, a male fantasy. In theorizing the virgin land, writers like Jefferson, and explorers like Lewis and Clark, created "a daily reality of the harmony between man and nature based on the experience of the land as essentially feminine" (4). The process began at first contact, with the first New World settlers experiencing "the landscape, not merely as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a maternal "garden," receiving and nurturing human children" (5). Through western migration the civilizing process

continued this process of domination, while promoting the rhetoric of nurturing; As white pioneers settled the frontier, the nation “grew.”

In the nineteenth century, western settlement became increasingly embodied in the figure of the manly frontier hero. R.W.D Lewis argues that the dominant nineteenth century American myth was the Edenic garden, a place beyond time and space where the unique (and superior) American is born anew as an Adamic figure. Focusing on the years 1820-60, Lewis describes this American Adam as “an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). Tracing the American Adam through the nineteenth century, Lewis argues that the period’s more formidable writers, including Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, interrogated the possibilities of this figure’s purity and innocence. Only in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*, Lewis comments, do we find “a fictional Adamic hero unambiguously treated” (5). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it was Cooper’s frontier fiction that established the prototype for a sustaining vision of the nineteenth century American hero.

In fact, numerous writers of frontier fiction played a role in establishing the masculine pioneer as an embodiment of American heroism. In Cooper’s novels, the Indian scout Natty Bumppo serves as an iconic representation of the Adamic hero. Bumppo is “a self-reliant young man,” as Lewis puts it, “who does seem to have sprung from nowhere” (91). Modeled after real life scouts like Daniel Boone, Bumppo successfully established an Adamic figure manifest through a coterie of real and fictional (or sometimes both) frontier icons, including Kit Carson, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, and, later, the stoic outsider in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*.

Cooper's vision of the frontier did not go unchallenged in the nineteenth century. A number of critics and authors—most prominently, perhaps, Mark Twain—wrote of Cooper's west as storybook romance. At the same time, writers like Caroline Kirkland, who moved with her husband William to Michigan in 1835, presented a much different vision of frontier life. Documenting her experiences in the popular *A New Home, Who'll Follow? or, Glimpses of Western Life*, Kirkland rejects the frontier hero's "masculine fictions," as Lori Merish describes them, concluding they bore little resemblance to pioneer living (114). Black cowboys like Nat Love and Oscar Micheaux traveled west, prospered, and authored books that challenged the aggressive and inaccurate "whiting" of the frontier hero.³

As the century progressed a group of writers more steeped in literary realism moved decisively away from an Edenic view of the West. Settlers pushed on into the trans-Mississippi region, into the Great Plains, and beyond, and idyllic notions of the "virgin land" increasingly became complicated by the harsh realities of claiming and cultivating that land. After the Civil War, America turned its full attention to the bloody business of the Indian Wars, and farmers pushing west confronted long droughts and hostile natives, while finding themselves increasingly under the thumb of bankers and railroad agents. In 1884, Hamlin Garland boldly claimed that "for nearly a century free land has been a myth. Every foot of it," he argues, "was bought with blood and sweat and tears" (qtd in Pizer, 403).

Modern scholars continue to deconstruct the myth of the frontier and its Adamic figure. Deidre MacNeil points out that the tradition of the frontier hero extends back to the seventeenth century captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson and others. Failing to

acknowledge the diverse strands of this narrative, as MacNeil claims, “interferes with our efforts to move past a gender-bifurcated society and culture” (68). “Myth,” she explains, “has the power to obscure and confuse the drives of competing realities into one apparently unified whole. Being ignorant of one’s myths results in being unaware of this power” (69). Attempting to reconcile these competing realities, MacNeil holds Rowlandson up as the true prototype of the frontier hero, noting that her narrative demonstrates all the qualities of frontier hero described by Lewis, Richard Slotkin, and others. In addition, MacNeil highlights three other essential traits of the frontier hero demonstrated by Rowlandson, including, importantly “the willingness to engage with the American wilderness and the native peoples at an intimate level and in isolation from European American culture” and “the ability to integrate aspects of Native American culture and attitudes into her personality and value system” (7).

For all of that, the frontier mythos Slotkin describes and the solitary figure of the white male frontier hero have proven remarkably resilient, throughout the nineteenth century and well beyond, becoming fixed in the American imagination. In the second half of the nineteenth century, challenges to hegemonic masculinity helped shape this mythology. Gail Bederman describes these as years when American notions of manhood were powerfully contested and thoroughly reimagined through a number of cultural projects and movements, some complementary and others conflicting, but all working together to mark the boundaries of a “new” American masculinity. In these years, she argues, entrenched patriarchal forces were “casting about to synthesize new explanations and descriptions of male power” (19). In fact, the word “masculinity” gained significance in America during these years, as the frontier hero rose to ever-greater levels

of prominence. As Bederman points out, late nineteenth century frontier narratives contributed to a powerful formulation of hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, the most reliable venues for these narratives, such as the dime novel or the Wild West show, fell squarely in the purview of American boyhood.

Building on Bederman's thesis, this dissertation examines how frontier narratives and their interactions with boyhood helped establish and inform notions of race, gender, and national identity in the late nineteenth century. Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" which makes powerful use of the Adamic figure, is a key building block for my project. First delivered at a meeting of the American Historical Association during Chicago's 1893 World's Fair, Turner's thesis explains how westward migration gave shape to the distinctive American character, describing the frontier as an ever-shifting contact zone, wherein inhospitable conditions helped foster the American's "domineering individualism." Responding to the Census Bureau's 1890 declaration that precious little "free land" was still available and the frontier would soon be officially "closed," the essay gave voice to a growing sense of anxiety among prominent historians that America's frontier period was ending.⁴

Turner's essay also gestured to a shift in how many Americans imagined the nation, both in terms of reconciling the past and imagining the future. In Turner's accounting, the story of America played out from east to west rather than from north to south, a claim that became increasingly prevalent in the late nineteenth century and beyond. In his biography of celebrated Civil War veteran James Tanner, James Marten speculates as to why Tanner's fame was so fleeting in comparison to his contemporary, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Tanner's narrative, Marten concludes, was rooted in the

legacy of the war, and it “asked—indeed, demanded—that Americans look back to a tragic if glorious time; to dwell on obligations rather than opportunities; to acknowledge that they could never recognize or reward veterans enough.” Cody, on the other hand, offered a more palatable story of American progress, recalling a more recent past that many Americans recognized and, in fact, celebrated. While the Civil War became increasingly “irrelevant” in American popular culture, Buffalo Bill represented a vision of the West that “became a metaphor for the American spirit, of which everyone had at least a little” (Marten, 165).

Of course, in many ways, Turner’s thesis looked backward as well, rejecting new (at the time) delineations of history in favor of a return to the romanticism of Cooper—or even Twain himself. As Richard Hofstadter argues, Turner’s address taps into the same rich vein that had long “fascinated imaginative writers,” namely the trope of the “escape from society” toward “the original innocence and promise of nature, as represented in the vast unspoiled interior of woods and prairies” (74). For Turner, westward movement is a (pro)creative act. Pioneering takes the European and, through exposure to the land, it births the “American.” As Turner famously describes it, the American character is actualized through “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward.”

While the existence—or rather the idea—of this “free land” proves a crucial part of Turner’s thesis, the dynamic nature of the frontier is just as critical. The most important part of the settlement process remains the process itself, with the frontier serving as “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” The land is not simply there to be acted on by the pioneer; rather, the two

develop through exposure to each other, enacting a model deeply steeped in evolutionary theory. Turner describes this process in some detail:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick, he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American (Chapter I).

Turner's theory suggests myriad connections between frontier mythology and nineteenth century cultures of American boyhood. Leslie Fiedler, in his sweeping assessment of American literary history, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, links boyhood to romance and escape. Assessing Cooper's stories, Fiedler notes that "the American boy becomes for a little while the Indian, the trapper," before "returning later to his memories of himself as somehow really expropriated and disposed, driven from the Great Good Place of the wilderness by pressures of maturity and conformism" (196). In highlighting the theme of escape, along with the intriguing notion of the boy "becoming" the trapper or Indian before returning from the place of memory, Fiedler's comments touch briefly on a powerful theme in nineteenth-century literatures of American boyhood, one most prominent in Huck Finn's "lighting out" for the territory ahead at the end of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At the same time, this motif of escape gestures to only one facet of the complex interactions between frontier mythos and literature of boyhood in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Strong thematic connections between the emerging rhetoric of child development and ideations of the frontier also resonate in Turner's thesis. The myth of escape that dominates Turner's essay is also a creation myth. That myth presents the rebirth of the European as the American, the eastern urbanite as the western pioneer, and most prominently, the old as the young. Moving away from traditional germ theory, Turner makes powerful claims about American identity and the distinctive qualities of the American character, qualities born not out of "Germanic germs" but rather through the process of mastering New World wilderness. As Turner explains it, the "American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area" (Chapter I). In this construction, the frontier hero works both as an impossible ideal and a vital evolutionary link.

As concerned with the past as with the future, Turner's thesis follows Herbert Spencer's evolutionary model of movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity. The nation develops through "the steady growth of a complex nervous system from the originally simple, inert continent," and the figure of the male pioneer serves as both author and product of this transformative process, the stimulating agent who brings the "inert continent" to life. Turner's pioneer represents "an omni-competent, and almost monstrous archetype of aggressive masculinity" as Hofstadter describes him. This Adamic figure is masterful, independent, and unrefined, perfectly suited to thrive in "a Darwinian battleground, an arena of rigorous and demanding competition" (151). First, though, he is mastered by the wild, then regenerated through contact with—and conquest

of—the primitive. In his reliance on Spencer’s evolutionary paradigm, Turner codes the frontier as a male space, and more precisely, a space where young manhood is developed.

Spencer’s theories of development were heavily gendered. Boys and girls, he argued went through radically different cycles of development. While girls seemed to develop faster, they also peaked much earlier. As Crista Deluzio explains, Spencer and his followers, including American psychologists Edward Clarke and G. Stanley Hall, used this logic to explain how female development prepared girls for reproduction and marked women as inferior to men. The boy developed more slowly, but his growth also held greater possibilities. Prolonged development may have rendered the boy more awkward and immature as a youth, but, as Deluzio describes it, that slow growth “was nonetheless both cause and effect of his superior evolutionary development” (64).

Spencer’s theories, which provided the foundation for Social Darwinism, had a clear racial component as well. In his evolutionary model, “individual evolution” replicated the evolution of the species. In this way, the boy had a higher developmental ceiling than the girl, and the civilized—that is white—boy has the highest ceiling of all. Exposed to the frontier, it was this white boy who grew into Turner’s triumphant American pioneer.

Driven by new—and still unrefined—theories of evolution and the flawed science of Lamarckian genetics, child study pedagogues like Hall pushed a model of child development that drew on much of the same ideological ballast as Turner’s thesis. The education and supervision of boys represented a burgeoning cultural focal point for late nineteenth century America. Hall’s *Adolescence*, published in 1904, stands as an exclamation point for this cultural moment. While a broad cross-cultural discussion of puberty and adolescence has been traced back as early as 1875, Hall’s massive two-

volume book crystallized a philosophy of child study that became a dominant American narrative. The overwhelming focus of *Adolescence* is on the education of white middle-class boys whom Hall sought to immunize from the effeminizing tendencies of civilization. Through the doctrine of racial recapitulation, Hall and other pedagogues imagined boyhood as a site for revitalizing white middle-class manhood.

For Hall, and for others, this revitalization involved giving shape to the inner wildness of the boy. At the same time, a number of important nineteenth century cultural projects facilitate Hall's evolutionary logic by projecting boyhood through the space of the frontier. Frontier themes appealed to all manner of late nineteenth century cultural producers, including theatre managers, photographers, cartoonists, and, of course, writers. Some of these men, such as Hamlin Garland and William Cody, lived as actual boys on the frontier, while others imagined the frontier as a space for idealized boyhood. While adopting different approaches and attempting to reach different audiences, they all drew implicitly on the powerful relationship between the space of the frontier and cultures and ideologies of boyhood.

While this dissertation surveys a range of important nineteenth century writers and performers, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody occupies a central figure in the organization of this project. Cody serves as a critical framing device for my analysis of the powerful connections between frontier mythos and American boyhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Describing Buffalo Bill, and the cultural context that helped birth him, Henry Nash Smith explain how "the persona" created by decades of frontier fiction authors "was so accurate an expression of the popular imagination that it proved powerful enough to shape an actual man in its own image" (114). This project

will explore less of that “actual man” and more the icon he became. The iconic figure of Buffalo Bill focalizes the dynamic relationship between discourses of boyhood and frontier narrative.

My analysis of that relationship is organized around three central themes as they surface in various nineteenth century forms of literature and performance. As alluded to earlier, late nineteenth century narratives of frontier masculinity are closely linked to constructions of boyhood. I examine how nineteenth century frontier narratives position the West as a space where white American boys grow into hyper-masculinized American men. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this process was manifest in competing narratives of progress. Rooted in the longstanding tradition of the American pastoral, men like Turner celebrated the pioneer as a farmer. Other writers and entertainers touted a much more violent vision of the American pioneer, one who made American history with a gun rather than the plow. The competing narratives of the gun and the plow play an integral part in broader cultural negotiations of American boyhood and its relationship to frontier mythos. Finally, and most critically, that mythos mediates notions of boyhood through the rhetoric of peril and promise; in the imagined West, boys can become outlaws or heroes, delinquents or pioneers. The delineation of proper and improper boyhoods represents a major theme in the frontier narratives examined here.

My first chapter, “The Dime Western and the New Adolescent Hero,” examines how sensational literature projected diffuse visions of the frontier as a youth space. In the late nineteenth century, western dime novels were seen as “dangerous reading” for both middle-class and lower-class boys, though “dangerous” in notably different ways. Through these texts and the reactions they inspired, we can see how the frontier was

configured variously as a place of ideal boyhood and a breeding ground for delinquency.

In reading dime westerns against more didactic works by Horatio Alger, Oliver Optic, and others, frontier narrative and boyhood worked in complex ways to inform as well as to enforce burgeoning notions of American adolescence and national progress. In particular, these texts work to prolong adolescence in the frontier hero, who grows powerful without growing into manhood, establishing the frontier dime novel as a genre that antagonized the genteel class and threatened notions of white middle class domesticity.

My second chapter, “Boy Life on the Prairie: Cody, Garland, Twain, and Ideal Boyhood,” examines how frontier themes operated in and through the form of the American Boy Book. Like western dime novels, frontier Boy Books helped negotiate ideologies of proper and improper boyhood in late nineteenth century America.

Mark Twain’s boyhood novels were deeply invested in the idealization of American boyhood, a process that became increasingly problematic in his imagining of the West. Twain devoted considerable energy to following Huck to the frontier, commencing *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* immediately after he finished the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. His inability to finish the book reflects a struggle to locate a space for proper boyhood to flourish, a struggle that works to interrogate notions of idealized American boyhood.

Nearly twenty years later, Hamlin Garland’s *Boy Life on the Prairie*, 1899, continued to mark the frontier as a site of/for idealized boyhood. When 12-year-old protagonist Lincoln Stewart first sees his new frontier home, he’s seized by an intense “longing to know it—all of it, east, west, north, and south.” Lincoln has no desire to

return home: “the horseman had become his ideal, the prairie his domain” (8).

While not strictly a boy book, William Cody’s *The Life and Adventures of Buffalo Bill*, published in 1879, represents the harbinger of a different kind of frontier narrative. Setting the stage for his successful career as a performer, Cody establishes “Buffalo Bill” as a manly hero developed from frontier boyhood. Carefully bridging the gap between proper and improper boyhoods, Buffalo Bill presents the frontier as a space for performing idealized boyhood, simultaneously mourning the disappearance of both frontier and boyhood alike.

My third chapter, “The Wild West: Making History and American Boyhood” examines how Cody and his partners designed Buffalo Bill’s Wild West to appeal to younger audiences. The show was built on Cody’s reputation as a dime novel hero, a reputation that signified his appeal to a large boyhood audience. Cody and his partners were well aware of Buffalo Bill’s relationship to American boyhood, and throughout the show’s tenure, they developed a dynamic model of the frontier narrative designed to appeal to child—notably boy—spectators. This chapter, too, reveals the ongoing negotiation of proper and improper boyhoods, as Cody and his partners mediated perceptions of propriety and social class in their framing of frontier narrative.

Charting the evolution of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in the 1880s, this chapter surveys broader cultural hopes and concerns about American boys and the settlement of the frontier. Navigating these hopes and concerns deftly, Cody and his partners turned Buffalo Bill into a potent symbol of America’s past and future. Targeting the young boys in the audience, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was increasingly promoted not only as entertainment, but also as a crucial educational tool and a valuable link to the “vanishing”

frontier.

My fourth chapter, “Wild West Children: The Frontier in Performance and Play” focuses on the children in and around Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, from child performers to family members living with performers (particularly the Native American families) who traveled with Cody throughout the country and abroad. From young sharpshooters like Johnny Baker, to Native American children who toured and performed with the show, the young performers in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West underscore the importance of race, class, and agency in giving shape to the “Wild West.”

The form of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West facilitated an innovative mode of performance, taking place both in the arena and in the encampments around the show, where many performers, notably Native Americans, would live. These spaces blurred the line between performer and spectator, providing child performers with rare opportunities for agency. Seizing these opportunities, these young performers complicated the frontier narratives produced by Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, notably the show’s distinct narratives of white hegemony and proper and improper boyhood.

While my emphasis will remain on American boyhood, this chapter works to contextualize the “Wild West” experience in a broader consideration of childhood as well. Boys may have represented the bulk of Cody’s audience, but girls certainly attended the shows. What’s more, the “Wild West” itself contained complex messages about gender, most famously in the figure of sharpshooter Annie Oakley.

The structure of this dissertation is designed to encompass American social and cultural history through an assessment of the rich ideological categories of boyhood and frontier mythology, and the ways they contributed to narratives of race, class, gender, and

nationality during the second half of the nineteenth century. Of course, the relationship between boyhood and the American frontier continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, as the increasing visibility of the Cowboy in American culture clearly demonstrates. However, with the rapid escalation of mass culture, especially the prominence of film and later television, and the intensifying—and more intensely focused—commodification of childhood in these years, the parameters of that relationship shifted rather markedly. Frontier mythos, while enduring, increasingly drew on the power of nostalgia, while many facets of childhood and children's culture became increasingly separate from adulthood.

In the second half of the nineteenth century American mass culture was in its incipient stages, as mass-produced literature, such as dime novels, and spectacle, such as Cody's "Wild West," were able to reach a national audience for the first time. As such, these years present a unique opportunity to see early attempts by cultural producers at reconciling conflicting ideologies of both frontier mythology and notions of boyhood in popular movements, such as the scouting movement, and entertainments such as the dime novel. Through diverse cultural venues, a host of contested meanings arose, meanings that helped shape a broader understanding of the American frontier and the American boy. The symbolic language brought forth in these interactions played a prominent role in describing American cultural identity, both in these years and in the years to come.

Endnotes

¹ See Thomas Fuller, “Go West Young Man!—an Elusive Slogan,” for an extended look at who may have (and who clearly didn’t) utter these famous words.

² For a comprehensive history of westward migration, see Robert Wine & John Mack Faragher, *The American West*. For a look at how notions of the frontier worked their way through American culture in the twentieth century, see Patricia Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century.”

³ See *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, by Nat Love, and *The Conquest*, by Oscar Micheaux.

⁴ This project evaluates the astonishing staying power of Turner’s thesis as part of American mythos. In *Under an Open Sky*, prominent western historians, William Cronin, Jay Gitlin, and George Miles discuss the staying power of this myth in the face of significant criticism of Turner’s work as history. “For many historians,” they write, “the western past has lost its fascination because there seems to be nothing new or important to say about it. For many ordinary Americans, on the other hand, the western past has lost none of its excitement—for much of the same reason. It is so well known, so reassuringly familiar, that it feels like home”

Chapter One: The Dime Western and the New Adolescent Hero

On September 28, 1890, two young men were found shot to death in a boxcar in Wyoming. Their killer was soon revealed to be Charley Miller, a 15-year-old orphan from New York City. His victims, Waldo Emerson, 19, and Ross Fishbaugh, 20, were also young, having both left good jobs as clerks in Missouri to pursue their fortunes in Denver. The boys had money saved along with their parents' support and blessing for the journey; unlike Charley, they came from comfortable homes and were riding boxcars for a thrill. Miller could afford no other way to travel. He was poor, alone, and an avid fan of dime novels, so much so that he had renamed himself "Kansas Charley."¹

The murder made tantalizing headlines, playing on the fears of anxious middle class parents and pedagogues. In a typical story, a *Kansas City Times* reporter notes that despite "his extreme youth," Miller is "a young villain of exceptional wickedness and depravity" (He Bought). Charley's actions re-enforced the popular notion that sensational literature could turn a poor urban boy into a cold-blooded murderer. Emerson and Fishbaugh's decision to play at tramping illustrated how "respectable" boys could be seduced and ultimately ruined by the very same texts. Both Miller and Emerson had pistols, and taken together, the fate of these three young people comments on the powerful and dangerous relationships constructed between adolescence, frontier narrative, and emergent popular culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, the crime gestures to the powerful connections between boys, boyhood, and frontier mythos embedded in various readings of the American dime novel western.

Ideations of youth and the frontier have long commingled in the American imagination. In the Federalist era, the fledgling nation was often couched in the language

of childhood, even as prominent thinkers and leaders began to conceive of America through the lens of westward expansion.² This ideological braiding culminated in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which successfully enshrined the idea of the frontier as the defining feature of the American ethos. For Turner, through "perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character." Richard Hofstadter credits Turner with giving voice to "the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin towards a new youth." (75). This notion of America growing backwards, evolving *towards* youth establishes the frontier as a very literal space of/for youth, a space that idealizes youth—fetishizing a vision of childhood, wherein the body grows young and the mind accumulates wisdom and experience.³

Aligning the space of the frontier with "youth," Turner makes notions of childhood critical to the story of American progress. And, of course, Turner's narrative provided more than a reckoning of American history; it offered a road map for developing and securing the nation's future. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, many projected that future through the reformulation of dominant American masculinity—that is, a formulation wherein white, cultural elites sought to remain dominant. From James Fenimore Cooper's romances to Turner's thesis, the western pioneer was consistently envisioned as a white masculine icon, and the frontier gained credence as an ideal space for developing this rugged figure into the right kind of American man, a process heavily invested in ideations of American boyhood.

Teddy Roosevelt became a paragon of how the raw materials of boyhood could be developed into robust American masculinity. As Clifford Putney describes it, after being teased and bullied as a sickly child in New York City, Roosevelt “took up gymnastics and shooting, was taught boxing by an ex-prizefighter, and later purchased a large ranch in the Dakotas” (33-4). Roosevelt’s move west was hardly symbolic, as the training ground of the frontier became influential to his widely promoted “Cult of the Strenuous Life,” devoted to turning effeminate middle class “sissies” into rugged western men. Roosevelt’s story—much like Turner’s thesis itself—demonstrates that for nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon elites, a successful new generation of American men depended on the current generation of American boys, boys that could ideally be shaped and molded in the proving ground of the frontier.⁴

In the nineteenth century imagination, however, the frontier suggested both promise and peril as a youth space. Founded by Charles Loring Brace in 1853, the Children’s Aid Society sought to rescue America’s poor urban youth from a life of destitution and criminality. These youths Brace notes, especially the boys “are far more brutal than the peasantry from whom they descend.” The city had hardened these boys, often the children of immigrants, whom Brace paints as a future generation of frightening criminals. Already, he describes, “they are ready for any offense of crime, however degraded or bloody” (27). Despite their peasant stock, Brace was mostly concerned with the environment these children lived in, and his main goal was to remove them from the vice and squalor of the city. Brace considered urban boys redeemable and sought to effect their rehabilitation by shipping them out to the country through the Children’s Aid

Society's placing out program. The program, which operated from 1854-1929, operated on the same logic undergirding Roosevelt's rhetoric of the Strenuous Life.⁵

While Brace and others conceived of the frontier as a redemptive space, some viewed his orphan trains much differently. To some critics, the trains were, as LeRoy Ashby puts it, simply "dumping criminally minded youths in western states," (39), paving the way for a growing criminal class.⁶ In this way, the frontier threatened to mold young boys in different ways than Brace imagined. Like former orphan train rider Charley Miller, the displaced urban youth removed to the frontier could grow not into rugged and virtuous manhood but into the worst kind of criminality. In the public imagination, dime novels played a critical role in these fears. In addition to his adopted name, Miller modeled his speech after the outlaw heroes in dime westerns, which as Brumberg puts it, became "a guidebook for behavior worthy of imitation" (48). Labeled "the boy murder," not on account of his victims but, as Brumberg argues, "because of his own youth," Miller stood out as a startling example of how sensational literature and the American frontier could nurture the at-risk boy into dangerous adolescence.

Nineteenth century fears about the dime novel may seem hysterical; however, these texts did serve, in ways that have largely gone unnoticed, as a distinct kind of adolescent literature.⁷ Through diverse deployments of frontier narratives, this literature challenged nineteenth century forces of authority on several fronts. Echoing the sentiments of many children's literature scholars, Steven Mintz labels the period from 1865 to 1910 "the golden age of American children's fiction" (185). Not co-incidentally, the American dime novel industry flourished in a similar time frame, starting with the 1860 publication of Anne Stephens's *Maleaska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* and

continuing on through the turn of the century. The relationship between these two emergent genres is a complex one. This much remains clear: the canonization of children's literature's "golden age," had as much to do with what kids shouldn't be reading as it did with what they should.

This chapter assesses dime novel westerns as a type of children's literature; specifically, it addresses the boy characters and readers, both real and imagined, of the dime novel western, arguing that these novels resonated as a dynamic space for early notions of American adolescence. Mapping the frontier as an adolescent space, dime novel authors like Edward Wheeler reconfigured late nineteenth century ideations of masculinity through American adolescence and established boyhood reading as an ideological battleground for notions of class, gender, and national identity. All in all, the notion of the frontier, both as a physical and psychic space represents a powerful analytical lens for understanding how the dime novel worked in concert with shifting constructions of boyhood to help articulate American identity in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

1. Dime Novel Subversions and/as Children's Literature

The dime novel label has been invoked to cover a range of popular literary forms, including those in different formats such as the story paper and the library. Some of these narratives predate 1860, while dime novel content surely seeped into the magazines and pulps that rose to prominence at the turn of the century. Still, most critics use the century mark as the end-point for the dime novel, and this analysis focuses on the years from 1870 to 1900, specifically the 1870s and 80s. Taking advantage of technological advances in printing, low postage rates, and improved networks of distribution, dime

novel publishing houses became known as “fiction factories”; novels were assembled quickly, with an emphasis on quantity rather than quality, and shipped all over the country. Produced in high volumes, and fueling emergent distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, dime novels represent one of America’s earliest and most prominent forms of popular culture.

Western themes dominated the early years of dime novel publishing, mixing fictional characters like Seth Jones and Deadwood Dick with the sensationalized exploits of real life figures such as Jesse James and William “Buffalo Bill” Cody. Owing a clear debt to Cooper’s frontier romance, these busy stories ratcheted up the violence (becoming known as “blood and thunder” tales), while willfully entertaining improbable scenarios, convoluted plot-lines, and a cheerful disregard for traditional narrative convention. The content of the stories presented a challenge to mainstream literary culture. In his analysis of nineteenth century sensational literature as working-class culture, Michael Denning reads dime westerns as a collision of contested meanings and potential sites of resistance to the forces of Gilded Age capitalism. While Denning rightly points out that not all dime novels were westerns, frontier mythos worked to engage the subversive potential of the genre and continued to be a prominent theme in sensational literature through the turn of the century and beyond.⁸

If dime novels posed a threat to existing class structures, they also worked to destabilize dominant modes of masculinity. In fact, Christine Bold describes the Western genre’s history as a story of competing visions of class-bound masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The modern day western, she claims, growing out of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, 1902, and later finding full flourish in the macho

swagger of John Wayne, was shaped by “a group of influential easterners who were prominent in politics and professional life—as well as being published authors—and who inhabited the most privileged class in Victorian America” (2). Bold describes these eastern power brokers, including Teddy Roosevelt, Frederic Remington, and Caspar Whitney, as the “Frontier Club,” a group whose appropriation of both western land and western stories quickly became “accompanied by a running battle over who got to tell the story and in what terms” (6).

Frontier Club fiction adopted the form and style of the dime novel western, while aggressively suppressing any notions of working class resistance. As Bold describes it, “a class line separates how the early dime novelists fictionalized cowboys and cattle barons and how frontier clubmen did” (92). For instance, in Frederick Whittaker’s 1882 *Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys*, the hunter-hero is a Harvard man gone West who ends up fighting local cattle barons and serving as “the champion of the poor” (qtd in Bold, 91). While Whittaker’s Jim Arthur stands up for homesteaders, townspeople, and independent cowboys, Harvard man Owen Wister upends this populist formula in *The Virginian*, encouraging the reader to celebrate the “natural aristocracy” of big ranchers and their loyal cow-punchers and to demonize small, independent settlers” (92).

At the same time, as Daniel Worden perceptively argues, nineteenth century dime novel westerns did more than challenge masculinity across or through class lines; these novels also threatened to sever the link between masculinity and the male body. Seminal dime novel heroes such as Deadwood Dick demonstrate, as Worden claims, “the emergence of a performative masculinity that is unhinged from essential ties to bodies, politics, and social conventions” (40).⁹ In fact, throughout the second half of the

nineteenth century, the dime novel became increasingly viable as a site where notions of American masculinity were conceived and contested, presenting myriad opportunities for characters to exist outside of conventional gender categories.

Janet Dean points to the example of Calamity Jane in this regard. Jane, a recurring character in Wheeler's Deadwood Dick novels, alternates between the role of friend, colleague, and even lover of the titular character, and, as Deen points out, her complex performance of gender works to "effect a transformation of Western masculinity, as well as Eastern femininity in the imagined West" (40). Deen cautions against reading dime novels as a direct challenge to Victorian notions of gender, suggesting that the radical nature of the dime novel's form, "its hasty production, its reliance on literary formula and cliché, its adherence to the requirements of seriality," reflects "an unconscious struggle against restrictive identity categories" (46). As Deen suggests, the radical form of the dime novel facilitated much of its subversive potential. In addition, nineteenth century dime westerns engaged with popular cultural narratives of the American frontier creating a dynamic open space for these slippery negotiations of class and gender roles. In the 1870s, just as the dime novel became established as a dominant form of popular culture, the frontier was being cemented as an organizing principle for American ideas of character and identity.

For all that, there are clearly limits to the emancipatory potential of western dime novels. As Worden notes, the books were hardly "free of the prejudices of their time" (33), most notably racial prejudices.¹⁰ Yet, if the dime novel masculinity, as Worden puts it, "still connotes whiteness," the looseness of the form allowed non-white authors to utilize that form to their own ends as well. In the most prominent example, black cowboy

Nat Love claimed the name of Deadwood Dick for his fictionalized 1907 autobiography. In doing so, as Michael Johnson argues, Love employs the “western setting to demonstrate that a black man can achieve the dominant culture’s masculine ideal” (99). Borrowing heavily from dime western tropes such as “Indian attacks, outlaws, gunslingers, six-gun justice, cattle roundups, and cowboy contest” (99), Love achieves, as Johnson describes it, “his desired masculine identity” through an appropriation of the dime novel form and its stylized masculinity. (102)

Dime novelists were certainly not the first authors to imagine boyhood through evocations of the frontier. Mark Twain, Hamlin Garland, and other chroniclers of genteel American boyhood, also explored this relationship in their work. These authors were well acquainted with dime novels as well, alongside their predecessors the penny dreadful and the story paper. Garland confesses to maintaining a steady diet of dimes during his prairie boyhood. Likewise, if Mark Twain had little patience for James Fenimore Cooper’s frontier “romance,” he had no reservations about dime novel westerns, which he read voraciously while working on *Tom and Huck Among the Indians*. Twain would likely have balked at recommending this literature for children, though, and, in fact, Tom Sawyer shows all the negative effects of too much “cheap reading.” Twain’s boy books, like all the late nineteenth century boy books, worked as variations on the bildungsroman; Unlike the young characters in most dime novels the “bad boys” in these middle class fictions always grew up to be good and proper,.

Still, considering the proximity between these literatures of boyhood, it’s strange that dime novels are rarely spoken of as children’s literature. Denning, argues strongly that dime novels “could not be called ‘children’s literature’” (30), citing an anecdote from

the memoir of dime novelist William Wallace Cook. Cook relays a directive from his editor at Beadle & Adams pointedly explains that the “stories in the Ten-Cent Library are not read by boys alone, but usually by young men, and in no case should the hero be a kid (qtd. in Denning 30). Of course, this anecdote evinces wariness on the part of dime novel publishers more than a lack of interest in cultivating child readers. With public crusaders like Anthony Comstock on the prowl, that wariness was understandable. At the same time, dime novels found a sizable child audience in the 1870s, and publishers of sensational literature themselves became increasingly open to courting young readers directly. In 1877, Beadle & Adams introduced the Half Dime Library, a series Denning and others readily admit was meant to target boys. In fact, through these efforts to target a youthful audience, and through its sustained focus on adolescent heroes, the Half Dime Library deserves consideration as the first true “young adult” literature.

The 1870s were a time of rapid change in the dime novel industry, and the genre’s growing boy readership helped motivate those changes. Beadle & Adams founders, Erastus Beadle and William Adams, retreated from day-to-day operations, but the firm remained incredibly active in this period. Beadle & Adams introduced five new series in 1877, changing the form of the books as well as the content. The Half Dime Library stands out on both fronts. As Albert Johannsen points out, the novels could be folded into fours and “were much handier to place inside a geography for intensive study, or to read beneath the projecting edge of a school desk” (Johannsen). If William Wallace Cook had written any Half Dimes, he wouldn’t have been reprimanded for including a “kid” as his hero. Many of the nickel novels featured young heroes. For instance, in T.C. Harbaugh’s 1880 *Judge Lynch, Jr.; or the Boy Vigilante*, the titular protagonist is not

only a kid but a one-boy lynch mob. His business card boasts: “Court always in session! Villains executed with neatness and dispatch! Hangings cheerfully attended to at all hours!” (2).

2. Reacting to the Threat

These developments in dime novel publishing could only have raised the anxiety level for guardians of middle-class childhood. As Albert Stone, Jr. describes it, “blood and thunder” stories were “anathema to most proper parents in the Gilded Age” from the start, and “the forces of gentility drew together in an effort to stamp out this vulgar literary intruder” (99). As Stone, points out, between 1865-1879, four children’s magazines—*Our Young Folks*, *The Riverside Magazine for Young People*, *The Saint Nicholas*, and *Harper’s Young People* (1879)—emerged to provide an alternative to the lurid fare proffered by the House of Beadle & Adams and their ilk (104). In 1878, *Scribner’s Monthly* published William Graham Sumner’s powerful indictment of the dime novel, “What Our Boys Are Reading.” Sumner laments that many young boys belonging “to families which enjoy good social advantages,” are reading cheap periodicals about “Indian warfare, California desperado life, pirates, wild sea, adventure, highwaymen, crimes and horrible accidents, horrors (tortures and snake stories), gamblers, practical jokes.” These stories promote “the life of vagabond boys, and the wild behavior of dissipated boys in great cities” (681). Sumner goes on to bemoan the lack of good boy roles in these stories, along with, importantly, their degradation of domestic life as “stupid and unmanly.” All in all, he concludes, the novels “poison boys’ minds with views of life which are so base and false as to destroy all manliness and all chance of true success” (685).

Sumner's screed hits on a number of the key elements that made dime novels such a palpable threat to middle class authority figures, betraying a rhetoric of boyhood embedded with powerful class infections. On one hand, as would be illustrated by the dead bodies of Waldo Emerson and Ross Fishbaugh this literature threatened to lead "good" boys into "bad" behaviors, bucking adult authority and straying from the conventions of middle-class respectability. In this way, dime novels were perceived as an open attack on the middle-class family; they encouraged boys to cut ties to the family, enticing them to believe they could thrive and prosper as "men" without making any concessions to parental guidance or middle-class domesticity. The "wild behavior" and moral dissipation threatened by the dime novels could lead the "good" boy to destruction by bringing him down to the level of the "boys in great cities," clearly coded as lower-class children from (largely) immigrant families, boys that is, like Charley Miller. As a product of degeneracy, through his absent parents, Miller was a potential criminal long before he became Kansas Charley. For boys like Charley, dime novels seemed designed to maximize their inherent criminal potential.

While some critics, like Sumner denounced dime novels publicly, others sought to mimic their themes in more wholesome literature. Children's magazines and authors of more didactic children's fiction alike recognized that their readers demanded a healthy dose of adventure and not just moral instruction. For instance, in his 1874, *Julius the Street Boy Out West*, Horatio Alger, Jr. sends his standard-issue protagonist, the plucky but aimless street urchin, out west to the prairies of Wisconsin. Julius benefits from fresh air and open land, while acquiring a proper father figure who instills in him the discipline to become a responsible, respectable farmer. As Laura Apol points out, from 1880-1910,

seventeen *Youth's Companion* serials were set in the West, and these stories all “exhibited a prescriptive quality” that ensured the narratives fit comfortably “within widely cultural standards” desired by the magazine’s middle-class readership (63). Operating in this vein, Stone’s “forces of gentility” had a fine line to walk, trying to woo youthful readers with the trappings of a literature they were desperate to censor.

Complicating matters, middle-class pedagogues didn’t agree about exactly what kinds of literature middle-class children should be exposed to, and many of them rated Alger as little above the dime novel. In *Eight Cousins*, 1875, Louisa May Alcott devotes the bulk of an entire chapter to extended condemnation of cheap literature, seemingly aimed at Alger and Oliver Optic.¹¹ Upon catching her young sons reading “the adventures of the scapegraces and ragamuffins,” Aunt Jessie gives them a thorough dressing down. “The writers of these popular stories intend to do good,” she confesses, but in her estimation they fail completely on this score, preaching a doctrine of “Be smart, and you will be rich,’ instead of ‘Be honest, and you will be happy.” Geordie, one of the boys, protests that the stories offer realistic portrayals of lower class boys and how they live, but Aunt Jessie presses on; “my sons are neither boot-blacks nor newsboys.” Ultimately, she concludes, the books cannot “help to refine the ragamuffins if they read them, and I’m sure they can do no good to the better class of boys, who through these books are introduced to police courts, counterfeiters’ dens, gambling houses, drinking saloons, and all sorts of low life.” Aunt Jessie’s diatribe re-enforces the degree to which class considerations mediated the dangers of cheap reading. At the same time, Alcott herself wrote sensational romances under the alias A.M. Barnard, and her singling out of

the “boys” here suggests these dangers were mediated by gender as well, with boy readers being all the more “at risk.”

Censorship represented a less subtle response to the dime novel threat. Anthony Comstock’s rise to power was partially fueled by the desire to keep these books away from American children, and he successfully framed sensational literature as a moral panic.¹² Comstock formed the influential Society for the Suppression of Vice in New York, “a quasi-legal organization,” as Michael Denning describes it, whose campaign against immoral and obscene literature resulted in the 1873 Comstock law, “prohibiting the mailing of obscene books and materials” (50). Comstock also operated as a special agent for the United States Post Office, employing those powers to harass publishers of cheap literature. He arrested the publisher of *The Fireside Companion* in 1872 and, in 1885, arrested Frank Tousey, who published a number of story papers such as the *New York Boys Weekly* and *Young Men of America*. Efforts to censor dime novel publishers reached a fever pitch during the trial of Frank James in 1883, when, as Denning describes it, the Postmaster General compelled “Frank Tousey to withdraw his outlaw tales” of the James gang” (160). Ultimately, in 1910 the postal service revoked the permits of a number of dime novel publishers, leading the last of them to abandon the trade.⁴

It’s important to recognize that these varied responses to dime novels do not represent universal condemnation of sensational literature in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Rather, they reflect the growing awareness that a vibrant market existed for a different kind of children’s book, one both less didactic and more engaging to child readers, and the recognition that this market needed regulating. The birth of this market, the desire of moral guardians to regulate it, and, later, the canonization of

American “children’s literature” can all be traced to the dime novel boom. At the same time, dime novel backlash mirrors prevailing social trends, falling neatly in line with a raft of reforms aiming to both reform and regulate young Americans in the decades following the Civil War. As Kathleen Chamberlain puts it, in these years, “schools and libraries came to be regarded not merely as educational training grounds or repositories of knowledge, but as major agents of socialization and citizenship.” The uproar about what children were reading, then, informed broader efforts to teach “both native-born and immigrant children...what it meant to be an American” (191). As a diverse spectrum of writers, educators, and organizers came to see boyhood as an increasingly crucial developmental period, many of these efforts were focused on boys.

Kenneth Kidd borrows the term “boyology” to describe a diverse group of undertakings designed to usher white American boys into successful American manhood. The term encompasses both nineteenth century movements like the playground movement and institutions like the Boy Scouts and YMCA. As David Macleod describes it, nineteenth century boy-workers saw great potential in the perceived purity of the boy. For pedagogues like G. Stanley Hall, “if purity was power, preadolescent boyhood seemed the ideal time to build masculinity” (Macleod, 55). In their work with white middle class boys, boy workers believed that tapping this boyhood potential played a key role in defining and sustaining the distinctive American character Turner and others had articulated. As seen in the case of Charley Miller, this kind of boy work was threatened by the increasing number of youth who didn’t fit Hall’s model of Anglo-Saxon purity. From 1870 to the turn of the century, more than 11 million immigrants arrived on American shores, many settling in cities like New York and Chicago.¹³ As Kidd points

out, urban reformers like Brace were responding to that trend, as it “emerged from several decades of concern (even panic) about immigrant street children in urban America” (93). If concern for middle class boys, suggested cultivation and development, for these immigrant children it simply meant control and containment. These projections of proper and improper boyhood interacted tensely in the nineteenth century imagination, and the dime novel western reproduced those tensions to powerful effect.

3. Dangerous Adolescence on the Frontier

Concerns about boyhood were complicated by the growing importance of adolescence, a trend readily reflected in the popularity of dime novels in the 1870s and 80s. Hall’s 1904 *Adolescence*, stands as a capstone moment in most histories of American adolescence, and he suggests an age range of 14 to 24. Ideations of youth as a distinctive life stage clearly existed much earlier than 1904, though. In *Rites of Passage*, Joseph Kett describes how, by the middle of the nineteenth century, American high schools had emerged as an alternative to boarding schools, a place where middle class parents could shield their teenage children from the “perils of adolescence,” weak judgment and a lack of impulse control along with exceeding if irrational passions, while maintaining the period of dependency (128-9). Harold Chudacoff traces similar concerns as early as 1828, through pastor Joel Hawes’s lecture on the “Dangers of Young Men,” noting that Hawes “defined “young manhood as the stage bounded by ages fourteen and twenty-one” (22). In 2003, revisiting his foundational work on youth cultures, Kett distinguished between the category of “youth” dominant for most of the nineteenth century in America, and the ideas of adolescence that crystalized in Hall’ work. For moralists of that earlier era, he claims, it made “no difference whether a youth was 14 or

25,” rather those were the years when boys typically left home and “hence had entered a critical and dangerous period” (357).

As cultural notions of adolescence started to crystalize in the 1870s, they interacted with sensational literature in diverse and interesting ways. For instance, Sarah Chinn connects adolescent rebellion directly to this cheap reading. Writing about turn of the century working girls, the children of American immigrants in the 1870s, Chinn claims these girls absorbed “the lessons of dime novels and story papers” and demanded the right to spend their own hard-earned money as they saw fit. (84) Joseph Kett speculates about a different connection between sensational literature and emergent adolescence wondering whether adolescents denied full agency “took refuge in the fantasy world of nineteenth century adventure literature,” finding refuge and escape “in the stories filled with sentiment, seduction violence, pirates, Indians, desperadoes, and young stalwarts who brazenly cut loose from family ties” (140).

A desire for autonomy likely brought together American youth with strikingly disparate lived daily experiences, be it the teen-age boy in a small town Connecticut high school or one of his age peers working in the Pennsylvania coal mines. Jacqueline Moore argues that boys growing up on the range were “just like boys everywhere in the country;” Texas boys, she notes, “idolized the cowboys they saw on the ranches or that they read about in dime novels and believed they embodied the very ideal of manhood. With their devil-may-care attitude toward society, cowboys mirrored the freedom that all young boys wanted from their parents” (43). Through this lens, the crisis of “what our boys are reading” becomes a cover for a much broader set of concerns than literary taste. Through dynamic heroes like Deadwood Dick, the dime western created a space for

different boy readers to imagine a host of alternate trajectories from childhood to adulthood, stimulating powerful visions of autonomous young people triumphing over the restrictions of age and the oppression of adults.

Critics have largely ignored the preponderance of adolescent heroes in the Beadle half dimes. Henry Nash Smith argues that the “strongest link connecting the Beadle Westerns with the frontier narratives established by Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* is the presence of a benevolent hunter without a fixed place of abode, advanced in age, celibate, and of unequaled prowess in trailing, marksmanship, and Indian fighting” (102). It’s hard to square that analysis with *Deadwood Dick*. He may not be a “kid,” but he’s not “advanced in age” (or, as we’ll see, celibate) either.¹⁴ In fact, by positioning his hero as a liminal “youth,” Wheeler blurs the line between child and adult, while providing an alternative to the stereotypical frontier hero handed down from Cooper. Contemporary critics of the dime novel surely picked up on this trend. In an 1884 lecture on the evils of “vile literature,” Anthony Comstock warns, “the hero of each story is a boy who has escaped the restraints of home and entered on a life of crime” (qtd. in Mailloux, 120). Ultimately, in showcasing this young hero as the star of a new format aimed specifically at an audience of boys, Beadle & Adams created a new kind of children’s literature that threatened conventional narratives of social order on myriad levels.

The success of the Beadle & Adams Half Dime novel can be attributed, at least partially, to *Deadwood Dick*, the hero chosen to launch the series, which subsequently churned out 1,168 consecutive issues. Edward Wheeler’s *Deadwood Dick, the Prince of the Road*, proved to be, as Johannsen describes it, “a very lucky choice for the new series,” and *Deadwood Dick* went on to star in 130 Beadle & Adams novels, living on

through innumerable reprints and pirated editions. He even outlived his originator who authored a mere 34 of the titles (hundreds of additional titles appeared under Wheeler's name but were clearly written by others). The choice of Deadwood Dick as a protagonist lends additional weight to the notion of western dime novels as adolescent-driven, reformulating the mythos of the West as a space of and for youth.

Critics have not failed to seize on the subversive potential in Deadwood Dick. Daryl Jones notes that Dick was the first Western hero who "openly defied the law," reacting "to social restraint so violently as to waylay stages and rob banks" (81). Smith laments Dick's abandonment of gentility as the Western's last chance to "develop social significance" (119), while Denning offers a useful counter to Smith's analysis, reading Deadwood Dick as a vigilante figure who, not only, seeks rightful revenge against the villains who have robbed him of his family fortune, but, more importantly one who organizes local miners to fight the oppressive interests of Gilded Age capitalism; Dick's main antagonist in the first novel is the Old Mechanic, whose name, as Daniel Worden points out, "seems to mark out the older artisan class, unionized and unwilling to join rank with unskilled laborers" (*Masculine*, 29). Again, as Christine Bold points out, working-class sympathies were commonplace in western dime novels throughout the nineteenth century. In the Deadwood Dick novels, as we'll see, these conflicts often boil down to "old" vs. "young."

It's unsurprising that the Deadwood Dick series gives free play to varied readings, as Wheeler's main character is defined by his fluidity. He first describes Dick as a lone rider passing through the Custer gulch toward a notice offering a \$500 reward for "the

notorious young desperado who hails to the name Deadwood Dick.” The rider is, of course, Dick himself, and this is how Wheeler introduces him:

He was a youth of an age somewhere between sixteen and twenty, trim and compactly built, with a preponderance of muscular development and animal spirits; broad and deep of chest, with square, ironcast shoulders; limbs small yet like bars of steel, and a grace of position in the saddle rarely equaled; he made a fine picture for an artist’s brush or a poet’s pen (280).

That picture reveals a familiar ideal of frontier masculinity, from the ease in the saddle and close connection to the primitive to the broad chest and square shoulders.

“Only one thing,” Wheeler reveals, “marred the captivating beauty of the picture.” Dick is dressed head to toe in skin-tight black buckskin, with a black mask covering his eyes, an appearance that “presented a striking contrast to anything one sees in the wild far West” (280). The buckskin marks Dick’s connection to the frontier scout, an archetypal mountain man type established by Kit Carson and Daniel Boone, and later made into a global icon by William “Buffalo Bill” Cody⁵. The black clothing and mask suggest something less benign and more mysterious, the effect so strong that Wheeler stops to remind the reader how this apparel “marred” Deadwood Dick’s natural beauty,

While unusual, Dick’s appearance ultimately proves superficial. Wheeler’s hero is more than a master of disguise; he proves capable of altering his appearance completely so that, essentially, there is nothing to disguise. As Worden describes it, “Deadwood Dick is introduced as entirely surface” (26). This surface can be perpetually inscribed and re-inscribed with a changing set of names and features. Indeed, a few pages later, Dick appears in the guise of Ned Harris, a well-appointed gentleman with “a pleasant, handsome, youthful face.” Harris sits at the table with a notorious card sharp and his intended mark, and as those two play cards “he commenced to pare his finger nails. The

fingers were as white and soft as any girl's" (287). Later, Dick reveals his given name to actually be Edward Harris, a name he soon casts aside again to reclaim the name and image of Deadwood Dick.

Manipulating his name and image, Dick turns blankness into a powerful weapon, one that, in fact, he can't always control. In the next book in the series, *The Double Daggers; or Deadwood Dick's Defiance*, 1877, Dick finds himself hotly pursued by a questionable lot of vigilantes known as the Deadwood Regulators. A young man appearing to be Dick confronts Dashing Dave, the leader of the regulators in a saloon, with "a cocked revolver in his right hand, which was as white as a woman's (2). The man accuses Dave of stealing his seat and demands it back. Instead the Regulators arrest and hang him as Deadwood Dick, though he claims to be Owen Hawk—as in fact he is. Justin McKenzie, Dick's brother-in-law, is present at the hanging and even he believes Hawk to be Dick. After the hanging, Deadwood Dick's "ghost" haunts the region, picking off the regulators. That ghost, of course, is Dick, whose physical appearance proves mutable and ephemeral throughout Wheeler's novels. In many cases, as in *The Double Daggers*, this mutability serves as a driving agent for the story's plot.

Following critics like Judith Halberstam, Worden's chief interest is in how Deadwood Dick serves to de-couple masculinity from the male body. He points out that Dick's "fluid masculinity provides vantage points for a critique of class hierarchies," and, ultimately, effects "a way of belonging apart from hierarchical structures." I find it equally interesting that the body in question presents as neither clearly a "boy" nor a "man." Wheeler specifies Dick's age as "somewhere between sixteen and twenty." Clearing marking him as a "youth," or, an adolescent. Other than his piercing black eyes,

the one consistency in Wheeler's description of this character is a focus on his "youthful features." Dick may be purely surface, but in all of his guises he retains his youth. In this way, the category of youth operates as both fixed and fluid, its boundaries discernable, while the territory within remains perpetually obscured, its contours and features open to be arranged and re-arranged.

Alongside Dick, the novel's other prominent male characters are all identified by their youthfulness. Wheeler describes Fearless Frank, the first character to appear in the novel, as "an interesting specimen of young, healthy manhood, and, even though a youth in years, was one that could command respect, if not admiration, wheresoever he might choose to go" (273). Harry Redburn, whom Dick rescues from the card sharp at the Metropolitan Saloon, is introduced as a "young and handsome 'pilgrim.'" Most intriguing of all, perhaps, is the mysterious outlaw who first appears to offer Harris and Redburn refuge from a gun-toting mob. As the duo flees the mob, "a trim boyish figure stepped before them, from out of the shadow of a new frame building" (291). After being led to a safe hiding place, Redburn pauses to consider his rescuer. Wheeler describes this figure as of "medium height and symmetrically built; dressed in a carefully tanned costume of buck-skin being fringed with the fur of mink; wearing a jaunty sombrero." The face was "slightly sun-burned, yet showing the traces of beauty even dissipation could not obliterate." After ensuring their safety, "the next moment the youth was gone."

"Who was that chap?" asks Redburn, not a little bewildered.

"That?—why that's Calamity Jane!" (292).

The eldest of Wheeler's male leads, Redburn is "somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-three years of age"(285), placing him at the end of adolescence as Hall

construed it. Unlike Dick and Frank, he has nothing of the outlaw in him, but, rather, is a straight-laced miner who's come to the Black Hills seeking fame and fortune. Notably, he's also the most naïve and (initially) helpless of the bunch. Dick's intervention prevents Redburn from being swindled by the card sharp, and it's Dick, again, who spurs Redburn into action, commanding the tentative "pilgrim" to shoot the card sharp down before the two fight their way out of the saloon.

Wheeler's emphasis on youth extends beyond the novel's main characters. He repeatedly describes the Black Hills region itself in terms of its age—the miner's Camp Crook is an "infant village" (282), the city of Deadwood itself an "infant metropolis" (283). Then there is "the Pocket," the hidden valley where Dick has settled with his sister, Anita, and where he and Redburn escape after the shoot-out at the Metropolitan Saloon. Accessed via a "large, narrow, subterranean passage, barely large enough to admit the horse and rider," this hidden valley spans fifty odd acres, walled in on all sides by "rugged mountains as steep, and steeper, in some places, than a house-roof" (294). Fed by Brown's Creek, the valley "was one vast, indiscriminate bed of wild, fragrant flowers," alongside "a log-cabin, overgrown with clinging vines" (294). In short, it's the settler's paradise, an Edenic paradise hidden from the outside world. This is where Ned Harris and his sister have been living and hiding; it's where Dick brings Redburn, and, later, it becomes Fearless Frank's destination.

Of course, this "unspoiled nature" cannot be sustained. With Redburn's help, "the Pocket is developed into a bustling and lucrative working mine, the full realization of any prospector's wildest dreams. This transformation is inevitable. As Wheeler describes it, "like a drama on the stage, a grand transformation had taken place; a

beautiful dream had been changed into stern reality; quietude and slumber had fled at the bold approach of bustling industry and life” (326). Redburn, along with the eccentric General Nix, runs the mine, with a troop of Ute Indians working under them. At the same time, it is a youth space, where Fearless Frank, Calamity Jane, and Deadwood Dick are drawn to resolve the novel’s (many) conflicts. This space survives an incursion from the Old Mechanic, who nearly kills Dick but winds up being hanged for his crimes, and witnesses a set of marriages, Fearless Frank to Dick’s sister Anita and Redburn to General Nix’s daughter Alice.

At first glance, the story’s conclusion suggests merely a strengthening of family bonds and the valorization of the transition from boy to man. Redburn becomes the manager of the mine, marrying his business partner’s long lost daughter, both reuniting and expanding the family unit. Frank hangs up his guns as it were, settling into married life, as he and Anita become heirs to the Harris family’s considerable estate. Importantly, all of these happy endings are achieved through the actions of the story’s youthful protagonists. It’s Redburn who takes the initiative in establishing the mine and who brings Alice and her father back together. Frank rescues Alice from the maniacal Sitting Bull and brings her to the Pocket, where she meets Redburn and is reunited with her father. Deadwood Dick, of course, kills the Old Mechanic, a clear instance of empowered youth triumphing over adult oppression, a pattern that continues throughout Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick novels.

More importantly, Deadwood Dick’s story does not end in marriage; in fact, he’s twice rejected on this score at the novel’s end, the second rejection coming from Calamity Jane, who curtly responds, “I have had all the *man* I care for! We can be

friends, Dick; more we can never be!” Dick takes the news in stride, professing, “it is destined that I shall live single. At any rate, I’ll never take a refusal from another woman” (356). In future installments, Deadwood Dick and Calamity Jane do marry—while in still future installments, he’ll be married to someone else or not married at all. The distinctions prove irrelevant, necessitated to be so by the dime novel’s mode of production. In this way, as Worden suggests, the genre effects an important separation from traditional novel form. With the need for dime novel heroes like Dick to remain unattached for the next installment in the series, Worden argues, these texts “come to contest the desirability of traditional narrative closure—particularly the marriage plot—and produce a vision of masculinity that creates publics outside of the usual structures of social belonging” (38).

For the adolescent, “the usual structures of social belonging” mean the end of the adventure and autonomy. Marriage itself isn’t the problem; it’s the settling down into the world of adult responsibilities. Settling down would entail the end of Dick’s status as a youth, his ability to harness the powerful blankness of his identity, and the end of adventure. For instance, after Fearless Frank marries Dick’s sister he assumes the name of Justin Mckenzie and begins working the mines. When he appears in subsequent novels, there is no appearance of his alter-ego, his days of free-spirited banditry have been left behind. Dick can’t come to terms with this vision of the future. In *The Double Daggers*, he proposes to another girl, Leone, promising that he will one day give up his life as a road agent for a life of respectability. He declares to Leone:

I shall not always cling to the road; already the day is dawning, when the Black Hills gold excitement shall sink into that semi-oblivion that you will find in the mining districts of Colorado and California.

Then the world shall know Deadwood Dick no more, and Edward Harris will quit the West for his old Eastern home where he has yet a fair record and can start in life anew. (16)

Deadwood Dick's sister Anita takes a less optimistic view, telling Leone, "I fear Ned will never desert the Black Hills, while there is life and excitement here! 'Here he is in his element; elsewhere, he would be lost—literally out of place'" (13). Ultimately, Anita is proven right; Dick and Leone are married, but the marriage doesn't survive the next installment of the series.

Critically, both Deadwood Dick and his sister align Dick's character with the space of the West, specifically the freewheeling frontier imagined through Dakota's Black Hills. This frontier space is Dick's element, a space in constant flux, much like adolescence itself. As an adolescent outlaw, Dick is one with this space. He knows that his youth, like the frontier itself, must eventually end, but the broader world of Wheeler's novel rebuffs such eventualities, providing a space of perpetual adolescent adventure.

4. Competing Ideals of Boyhood

By fixing Deadwood Dick in an endless cycle of high-octane adventures, Wheeler's novels separate themselves from the fare offered by more pedagogical-minded authors of boyhood like Oliver Optic or Alger. Ken Parille's analysis of Frances Forrester's *Dick Duncan* demonstrates this point. According to Parille, Forrester, like Optic and Alger, frames his adventure stories with the acknowledgment that boyhood adventures must all come to an end. So, at the end of *Dick Duncan*, the titular protagonist loses an archery contest, "for middle-class respectability demands that he never become anything like a Robin Hood-esque adventurer." Ultimately, as Parille puts

it, “if a boy is to possess a healthy masculinity, he must distance himself from play, pleasure adventures, and, most importantly from his desires” (91).¹⁵

Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick novels provide no such distancing. In this way, the novels threaten to do more than poison the minds of impressionable boys; they set the wheels of adolescent conflict in motion in ways that promote a different vision of masculinity, one linked to a powerful, independent vision of adolescence. As Albert Stone writes, “Deadwood Dick and his fellows had a profound effect upon the American family, upon parents as well as boys and girls. Children, of course, were carried away by their hero’s exploits, but to older people these bad men and vagabond boys represented a standing threat to law and authority.” The novels “played all the changes on the theme of adolescent rebellion against family, school, and society in general” (103). In sounding these themes, the dime novel valorized the autonomous youth, freed from adult guidance, as a hero and role model.

In this way, Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick novels represent more than a disruption of traditional narrative form; they refashion the most basic cultural assumptions of the bildungsroman. Dick doesn’t come of age; he is *already* of age, having mastered the art of survival in the “wild” West. In fact, he takes on the responsibility of teaching “tenderfoots” like Redburn (who’s actually older than Dick) how to thrive in the dangerous frontier that has shaped him from destitute orphan to powerful road agent. At the end of *Deadwood Dick, Prince of the Road*, Dick describes this process. He reveals that years earlier the Old Mechanic, revealed to be his and Anita’s uncle, Alexander Fillmore, murdered their parents, leaving them as orphans. After becoming their guardian, the villainous Fillmore seized the Harris family’s considerable financial assets

and proceeded to torment the children. Dick relays how they “were whipped, kicked about, and kept in a half-starved condition.” Eventually, Fillmore tried to murder them, but Dick escaped with his sister out west. The frontier then, creates Deadwood Dick, turning a powerless boy into a formidable outlaw (353). Throughout the run of the Deadwood Dick novels, the character remains fixed in a kind of suspended adolescence, one that recasts the sense of developmental delay implied by that term in favor of a sense of successful adaptation.

The West then, in Wheeler’s novels truly is no country for old men. The Deadwood Dick novels offer a series of heroic characters that have been forged by the frontier into powerful adolescent heroes. On almost every occasion, these youths come west after being cast off by duplicitous adults. Brought together in the frontier, though, the villainous adult always suffers, while the adolescent always triumphs. The fundamental nature of these two types, the “youthful hero” and “the old villain” becomes immediately clear in any of Wheeler’s character descriptions. In *The Double Daggers*, he first introduces us to the seventeen year old Leone, informing the reader that a “casual glance discovers of her ripening, rich young beauty, but a finer beauty she is possessed of in her sweet, warm dispossession.” By contrast, the villain who hunts her is Jasper Leslie: a fifty year old man whose “face was a mirror of his black, evil nature; his eyes constantly emitted gleams of baleful light.” Ruined by “dissipation and debauchery,” Leslie was “a repulsive object to gaze upon with his furrowed, haggard, sallow face; his sinister eyes; his huge wolfish mouth, and the accompanying grotesque ivories, and all relieved by a matted shock of hair and beard of purest white” (2).

Wheeler's west is no place for domesticity either. Dashing Dave, the leader of the regulators, represents a clear example of the dangers awaiting the frontier hero who goes in for family life. Dave "had won great name as an Indian-fighter during the troubles preceding the fatal Custer engagement, and was feared by a large class of the desperate characters who infested the Black Hills." As Wheeler describes it, though, Dashing Dave "had lost his family—a wife and a month-old babe—by the border ruffians, since coming into the Hills, and this had embittered his whole nature against mankind" (2). Blinded by hatred, Dashing Dave will do anything to destroy Deadwood Dick, leading, of course, to his own death at the novel's end, where Leslie also dies and Leone marries Dick-- the young again triumphing over the old

The recurring character of Old Avalanche provides an interesting footnote to the dynamic of old vs. young in Wheeler's Deadwood Dick novels. An old scout and inveterate Indian killer who serves as Dick's sidekick, Old Avalanche is a clear and direct descendant of Cooper's Natty Bumppo, a figure caught between two worlds. On the one hand, he's at one with the frontier, a dead shot who can track any outlaw and read the western terrain like an open book. At the same time, he's completely alienated by the rapid industrialization of the Black Hills and doesn't fit in with the new "civilization" taking root there at all; in short, he's got a foot in both worlds, while belonging to neither. Old Avalanche bears more than a passing resemblance to R.W. Lewis's iconic description of the American Adam. This distinctly American figure, as Lewis describes it, is "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race," a individual both superior to other men and removed from the world they live in (5).

Lewis's rhetoric echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's ideation of how American identity is forged in the contact zone of the frontier. Turner notes, "the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family." At the same time, Turner cautions that this "tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control." If Old Avalanche fits Lewis's Adamic vision to a tee, Deadwood Dick represents the most dangerous manifestation of Turner's frontiersman. Emancipated from history and family, he threatens domestic order. Not clearly embodying hegemonic notions of class or gender, he threatens the social order. Most importantly, as an autonomous youth, his "antipathy" to control represents the direct threat to hierarchical structures of age. If Old Avalanche represents the old vision of the frontier hero, the scout caught between two worlds, Deadwood Dick represents a dangerous new vision, a powerful adolescent shaped by the frontier who, in turn, exerts a powerful influence on the social world starting to flourish there.

Wheeler's Deadwood Dick novels were not anomalous in framing this vision of powerful adolescence. Many of Beadle's half-dime westerns invoke a frontier where adolescent heroes flourish, while the old and corrupt are swept away. At the same time, the heroic adolescent was no constant either—even in the Deadwood Dick novels. For instance, in Wheeler's *Wild Ivan, The Boy Claude Duval; or the Brotherhood of Death*, the titular character is an adolescent monster, or, as he describes himself, "an outcast, murderer, swindler, thief, rogue, and blackleg." Ivan boasts, "I have all the peculiarities of a fiend--as the Boy Fiend I am widely known in some parts of the West" (2).

Wild Ivan demonstrates his fiendish nature in various ways, notably by tormenting his young cousin Edith, another victimized orphan, who has “been prisoner in the power of a cruel uncle and aunt who sold my mom and brought me away while my father was absent on a tour through Europe” (5). Edith has rejected Ivan’s offer of marriage, though she quickly warms to Dick, “a gentleman, in appearance and manners, and a man whom women are apt to admire, because fearless, courageous, courteous, and tender” (5). Ultimately, Dick defeats Ivan, proving that even among adolescent road agents and murderers, a sense of honor is bound to prevail.

While Wheeler is careful to paint Dick as an “honorable” bandit, other dime novelists were even more careful to frame their stories of youthful adventuring with bold disclaimers. In *Roving Joe: The History of a Young Border Ruffian*, an 1882 title from Beadle’s Boy’s Library of Sport, Story, and Adventure, A.H. Post prefaces the text with a letter, “To my Boy Reader. In the letter, Post offers the following advice:

All that follows I believe strictly true, but however interesting it may *read*, I would not advise you to follow the example set by “Roving Joe.” A full score of years have passed since he ran away from home, but even now he has not forgotten the deep grief and anxiety his conduct caused his loving parents. His eyes glisten and his cheeks flush as he recalls the wild, free life he had in those boyish days—the “prairie fever” has never left him nor will it ever—but he often regrets that those youthful years were not more wisely spent. In these days, a school book is far more valuable than the hunter’s rifle. Stick to your studies at least until your beard is grown. Time enough then to take a holiday. (1)

Post’s disclaimer demonstrates that authors and editors recognized not only the power and possibility the frontier posed as an adolescent space but, also, the anxiety and fear the idea of that space generated in parents and other adult caretakers. In one way or another, all the Beadle authors reveal an awareness of these dynamics at play. Some, like Post react cautiously; others, like Wheeler, respond with a wink and a nod, as

demonstrated in a brief scene from *Wild Ivan, The Boy Claude Duval*. After joining forces with “Old Avalanche,” the aged scout tells Deadwood Dick a story about a bandit named Jack Shepard, Jr. “”Jack Shepard Junior, eh?” Dick jokes. “I once read in a yellow-covered book of Jack Shepard the highwayman. Is this Junior a chip from the old block?” (11). Sharing a joke with his readers, Dick demonstrates that he’s well-read—in all the books that matter—acknowledging that his youthful heroics are steeped in the established tradition of blood and thunder tales.

The distinctions between these tales and other boyhood literature becomes evident in evaluating Wheeler’s *Deadwood Dick* novels and Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* novels as frontier narratives. As Brace and other reformers described it, waves of immigration and simmering class tensions had turned the nineteenth century American city itself resemble a kind of frontier. As in Turner’s west, this urban frontier existed as a place that could turn boys into either the best and worst kinds of men. Aaron Shaheen describes how the urban frontier operates in *Ragged Dick*’s New York City. For Alger, he argues, “the city and the frontier exist dialectically. In fact, the two sites are not only mutually dependent, but almost one and the same” (21-2). In this analysis, Dick, the lower class bootblack, straddles the line between savage and civilized much like the traditional frontier hero. As he shows his young charge, Frank Whitney, around the town, Dick confronts peril in the form of duplicitous conmen and dangerous toughs rather than bloodthirsty Indians and ruthless road agents. Still, the New York streets offer many of the dangers a frontiersman might encounter in the West, and Dick, a “native” to this unpredictable environment, acts as scout, safely guiding the naïve Frank through this hostile terrain. Dick’s boy-savagery also proves key to his redemption. After being

taken in by Frank and his rich uncle, Dick, much like Turner's frontiersman, uses his access to both the "savage" and "civilized" to navigate the road to respectable American manhood.

If Ragged Dick displays many attributes of the frontier hero, he fails to attain the autonomy Deadwood Dick enjoys in Wheeler's novels. In both novels, the uncertain frontier proves difficult for the uninitiated to read, and both protagonists work as guides. In *Ragged Dick*, Frank Whitney can't spot a swindler, just as in *Deadwood Dick*, Harry Redburn fails to detect the card sharp. In both cases, the titular Dicks step in to assist their helpless friends. In Wheeler's text, though, the protagonist answers to no higher authority. Ragged Dick's good deeds are part of an exchange that ultimately leads him off the streets and into a respectable position as a clerk. In the urban frontier, a poor bootblack needs middle-class adult guardians to open up the road to respectability. Deadwood Dick needs no such help—nor, for that matter, respectability at all. Alger's city may be a frontier, but ultimately, it's still a place governed by traditional class hierarchies. Wheeler's Black Hills present a more tumultuous, less certain frontier, one that facilitates the passage from boyhood to adolescence by way of a powerful form of masculinity detached both from middle class propriety and the adult male body.

The Beadle & Adams Half Dime novel did not create the idea of the frontier as a space, both real and imagined, of limitless opportunity, one that offered an ideal space for open-ended self-fashioning. However, in the 1870s and 1880s, these dime westerns were among the first vehicles to appropriate this ideology, as enshrined in Turner's frontier thesis and, later, Roosevelt's "Strenuous Life" and to package it as a space of unfettered adolescence, marketed primarily for the consumption of American boys. In doing so,

western dime novels recast existent frontier mythos through a dangerous adolescent paradox. On one hand, these novels imagined the frontier as a space where promising boys could flourish as adolescent heroes, projecting, in the process, a bright vision of America's future. At the same time, heroes like Deadwood Dick also suggested a grimmer future, with the frontier acting as a breeding ground for dangerous adolescence, where future criminals like Kansas Charley threatened social order at the most basic levels. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, as the frontier "closed," these conflicting frontier narratives had a powerful impact not only on the construction of adolescence and the story of how boys became men but also on the story of how America was slowly refigured from a frontier nation into an imperial power.

Endnotes

¹ See Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Kansas Charley*, who uses Miller as an extended case study for a history of “kids who kill” in America.

² For representations of America as “young,” see Thomas Paine, *American Crisis*, sections VII and VIII. In Section VIII, he warns Britain they will lose any war with the colonies, noting America “is like a young heir coming to large improvable estate,” and Britain “like an old man whose chances are over, and his estate mortgaged for half its worth. See Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, Book One, for an analysis of Thomas Jefferson’s—and others—early focus on westward expansion.

³ Historians have long debated Turner’s place as an historian of the west—and long found fault with his theory as history. For a thorough reappraisal of Turner’s theory see John Mack Faragher’s *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, especially the Introduction and Chapters 1-2. This chapter, and my project as a whole, is concerned with Turner’s theory and its contributions to frontier mythos; in this regard, Hofstadter’s analysis of Turner and mythmaking remains relevant. For more on the frontier and and/as American mythology, see Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, chapters 1-3, and Faragher and Robert Hine’s *The American West*, Chapter 15.

⁴ See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, Chapters 3 and 5. In the former, she analyzes American psychologist G. Stanley Hall and his efforts to develop white boys into a better class of white men. In the latter, she examines Teddy Roosevelt and his construction of the frontier as proving ground for white manhood and American progress. Kenneth Kidd, *Making American Boys*, pages 34-6, suggests connections between Hall’s theories of boyhood and the space of the West. In Chapter 3, Kidd examines Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children’s Aid Society, and his efforts to rescue urban youth by sending them to the “open” and uncorrupted west.

⁵ For more on institutional responses to juvenile delinquency, see Barry Krisberg, *Juvenile Justice*, pages 19-36. For more on the orphan trains, see Stephen O’Connor, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children he Saved and Failed*, and Marilyn Holt, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*.

⁶ See Myers, 225, for L.P Alden’s comments on the placing out program. Alden, principal of the State Public School for Children, Coldwater Michigan notes in 1880, “I think that Mr. Brace has done a great thing for the city of New York in relieving it of so many incipient criminals, for which that city could well afford to erect him a monument. From all the testimony, however, that has reached me, it seems quite improbably that the West, where these children are sent, feel so grateful that it will contribute much towards its erection.”

⁷ With a special focus on 15 year old “serial killer” Jesse Pomeroy, Dawn Keetly examines teen murderers in the late nineteenth century, arguing (unpersuasively, to my mind) that these texts did prompt violent behaviors in youth.

⁸ Denning cautions that early criticism of sensational literature, by scholars like Daryl Jones and Henry Nash Smith, “tends to reify that genre, and, though giving an account of its internal relations, lose a sense of its relations to other genres” (76). He argues that framing dime novels about Jesse James or Buffalo Bill as westerns obscures the broader themes running through the bulk of sensational literature, be they factory girl romances or stories of heroic mechanics. See Marcus Klein, *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes*, and Shelly Streeby, *American Sensations*, for more on how class tensions and racial anxieties work to implicate various forms of sensational literature in broader cultural trends in nineteenth century America.

⁹ Daniel Worden argues that the subversive power of the dime novel actually works as a counter-narrative to the wholesale re-organizing of late nineteenth century American masculinity by cultural elites, as advocated by many scholars, most notably Gail Bederman. Worden suggests that Bederman overestimates the power of patriarchal structures men such as Teddy Roosevelt worked to enshrine at the end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. The point is well taken, though Bederman herself describes the installation and regulation of hegemonic masculinity as a process rather than a result. Bederman argues that at any historical moment, different ideas about manhood compete to have meaning and claim authority, and her stated aim is to understand the diverse practices and processes that construct history, revealing how these discourses of manhood compete for the status of “truth”

¹⁰ Bill Brown offers a concise history of the dime western in the Introduction to *Reading the West*. See pages 30-6 for his discussion of racial conflict in early dime westerns. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, analyzes dime novels and “Indian-Hating” in the context of developing ideas of American nationalism, pages 322-341. On page 329, Saxton offers a graphic breakdown of Beadle & Adams books and serials between 1859-1900, sorting them by setting and separating them into the categories “Indian-Related” or “Other. By his count, the vast majority of the titles are “Indian-Related” frontier westerns.

¹¹ For more on Alcott’s perceived attack on Optic, and the latter’s (very public) response, see Arthur Young’s “Banish the Books,” 424-5.

¹² Comstock is best known for his war on women’s reproductive rights and his efforts to censor “obscene” materials about abortion and contraception. Nicola Beisel offers a thorough and engrossing analysis of Comstock’s moral crusade against women’s rights (and their bodies) in *Imperiled Innocents*. Comstock was also concerned with the pernicious effect of dime novels on boys, a topic he expounds upon in the 1883 *Traps for the Young*. Beisel discusses Comstock’s triangulation of boys, dime novels, and delinquency on pages 64-66.

¹³ For more on American immigration in the 1860s and 70s, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, Chapter One. In *Guarding the Golden Door*, Roger Daniels analyzes institutional responses to these migration flows in an assessment of U.S. immigration policy from 1882-1917, pages 3-27.

¹⁴ See Richard Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in Age of Industrialization*, Chapter 5, on James Fenimore Cooper "the Leatherstocking Myth." For the development of the masculine frontier hero, from mountain man to bandit, see Daryl Jones, *The Dime Novel Western*, "The Hero in Transition," and Henry Nash Smith, pages 88-113. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg is one of the few critics to make connections between the iconic frontier hero and ideas of adolescence. See her analysis of Davy Crockett almanacs in the 1830s and 40s, *Disorderly Conduct*, pages 90-108.

¹⁵ A number of scholars highlight self-mastery and self-restraint as key to the transition from boyhood to manhood in late nineteenth century America. For more on this, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood*, Chapters 1-3. In "Middle-Class Men and the Solace of Fraternal Ritual," Mark Carnes examines how fraternal societies helped nineteenth century youth negotiate the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Chapter Two: Boy Life on the Prairie: Cody, Garland, Twain, and Ideal Boyhood

“The child is, if you like, something of a pioneer who restores these worlds to us, and gives them back to us with a facility or directness which ensures that our own relationship to them is, finally, safe.”

—Jacqueline Rose

Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s “The Story of a Bad Boy” famously begins with the author’s sly admission that: “this was the story of a bad boy. Well not such a very bad boy but a pretty bad boy; and I ought to know, for I am, or rather I was that boy himself” (1). These introductory lines sketched out the parameters for what later come to be known as the American Boy Book. First serialized in *Our Young Folks* in 1869, “The story of a Bad Boy” helped give shape to the genre, offering an adult recollection of childhood “badness” celebrated rather than regretted. For the adult authors of the Boy Book, and presumably its adult readers as well, boyish misdeeds paved the way to successful adulthood. In the decades that followed, this central narrative became a narrative convention and the figure of the Bad Boy became a trope. In fact, the preponderance of Bad Boy fiction throughout the second half of the century reflected broader cultural trends in imagining American boyhood. Character-building movements such as camping, scouting, and team sports all grew out of escalating anxieties about managing the boy’s “natural” precocity, so, as in the Bad Boy book, the unruly boy grew into responsible manhood. In confronting these anxieties, adults increasingly came to embrace what David Macleod describes as the “artificial cult of the bad boy” (54).¹

While less often scrutinized, Aldrich’s second chapter proves equally pertinent to a nuanced consideration of nineteenth-century “cults” and constructions of American boyhood. In this chapter, the author describes being born in the northeastern town of Rivermouth but moving south to New Orleans at eighteen months of age. He confesses to having “no recollection of New England” and becomes incensed when his father

informs him, “some years later,” that the family will be moving back north. The young Aldrich lashes out, kicking over “the little negro boy who happened to be standing by me at the moment” (2–3). Explaining his anger—he makes no apology for the violent outburst, noting that, as “for kicking Sam, I *always* did that, more or less gently, when anything went wrong with me”—Aldrich confesses that he had no real understanding of the North, supposing “the inhabitants were divided into two classes—Indians and white people.” As the young Aldrich understood it, “the Indians occasionally dashed down on New York and scalped any woman or child (giving the preference to children) whom they caught lingering in the outskirts after nightfall” (4).

Gesturing both to the publication date of 1869, and the author’s boyhood experiences some thirty years earlier, these passages probe the past to highlight powerful disjunctions, reminding Aldrich’s adult readers of the considerable distance between the America they lived in and the country they’d “grown up” with. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the violence enacted on Sam must have been read with as much indignation as amusement. Likewise, young Aldrich’s misconstruing of New York as an Indian war zone gestures both to the notion of a vanishing frontier alongside the continuing prominence of frontier mythology in the American imagination—and particularly in the imagination of the American boy.

As discussed in Chapter One, nineteenth century discourses of boyhood were mediated through—and shaped by—literatures of the frontier in ways that have largely gone unrecognized. The looming presence of the frontier in Aldrich’s boyhood reminiscence gestures to this longstanding interaction between American identity and the mythologizing of the West. In the 1830s, James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking*

Tales nourished that mythos. By 1869, Cooper's Natty Bumppo was supplanted by dime novel heroes like Jesse James and Buffalo Bill. In dime novels, the focus on youthful heroes like Edward Wheeler's *Deadwood Dick* articulated anxieties about the nation's youth and the young nation itself. Starting in the 1870s and 80s, Bad Boy authors wrestled with similar tensions, often invoking frontier themes and settings in the process. In their stories of bad boys grown into the next generation of good American man, these authors sought to project the West as a space of and for ideal boyhood.

These projections reveal pronounced divisions in the ongoing construction of American identity through frontier mythologizing. Those divisions are showcased vividly in the different frontier histories offered by Frederick Jackson Turner and William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. A number of scholars have delighted in the near meeting of these two powerful mythmakers at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, noting that just as Turner delivered his lecture to the American Historical Association in the White City, Cody was performing his "Wild West" over on the Midway.² As the end of the nineteenth century beckoned, both Turner and Cody read the closing of the frontier as the master narrative of American history. At the same time, both men interpreted that narrative along radically different lines. Turner's pioneer was a farmer in the end, and his story of American progress was the story of the cultivation of the land. Cody extolled a different kind of western hero. As the programs for his Buffalo Bill's Wild West boldly announced, the bullet was "the pioneer of civilization" (11).

Essentially then, the frontier narratives offered by Cody and Turner pivoted on different valuations of violence. Richard Slotkin points out that "Turner's work is remarkable for the degree to which it marginalizes the role of violence in the

development of the Frontier” (*Gunfighter*, 55). At its heart, as Richard White argues, “Turner took as his theme the conquest of nature; he considered savagery incidental.” In stark contradistinction, “Buffalo Bill made the conquest of savages central; the conquest of nature was incidental” (11). A similar set of oppositions separated western dime novels from more genteel literatures of boyhood. In Aldrich’s “The Story of a Bad Boy,” notions of Indian warfare are merely products of the boy’s overactive imagination. In dime westerns, Indian-hating—and killing—are central narrative themes.

The analysis that follows surveys these fractures in frontier myth-making through the writing of Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, and William Cody. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, these three authors all engaged with the “cult of the Bad Boy,” while ultimately creating texts that move beyond the constraints of the Boy Book. Starting within the confines of that genre, they use fluid ideations of the frontier to give shape and voice to equal malleable constructions of the American boy, offering insight into broader negotiations about the nature of masculinity, youth, and national identity that were intensifying in the final decades of the century. In turn, those negotiations help articulate important conversations about the projection of “authentic boy savagery,” the balance between Victorian morality and the “necessary” violence of settling the frontier, and the possibility of imagining a brand of American boyhood vitalized through the space of the West.

The diverse connections between imagined boyhood and frontier narrative were latent in the form of the Boy Book, a form that drew on the same ideological ballast as both G. Stanley Hall’s theories of child development and Turner’s frontier theory. Hall, like many other late–nineteenth century child study pedagogues, imagined boyhood as a

site for revitalizing white middle-class manhood. His influential work, culminating in the 1904 publication of *Adolescence*, was predicated on the doctrine of racial recapitulation. Hall theorized that boys had unique access to the primitive, so that through “savage play” the white middle-class boy could maximize his potential as a superior white middle-class man.³ As Mary Lawlor points out, Turner’s 1893 theory, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” posits a model of “evolutionary determinism” that managed to sustain “a rich nostalgia for what was left behind in the sweep of history” (43). As Turner writes, the “American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area” (Chapter One).

Starting with Aldrich’s “The Story of Bad Boy,” the paradoxical process of simultaneously looking forward and back becomes a defining feature of the American Boy Book, a popular genre that proved a powerful rhetorical tool in imagining and refining nineteenth century dimensions of American boyhood. As Maria Jacobsen describes it, the Boy Book “was steeped in nostalgia, it idealized the past,” and, at the same time, “it also presented a view of boyhood that could be used for the present” (11). Drawing on idyllic re-creations of their own remembered youth, Boy Book authors gave shape to an idealized boyhood that became, as Macleod describes it, “the model of normativity” for adult pedagogues and caretakers eager to mold the next generation of American boys into the right kind of men (52).

In refining this model, the Boy Book narrowed its range considerably by geography and, correspondingly, by race and class. Like Aldrich, many prominent boy authors—including Charles Dudley Warner, William Dean Howells and even Mark

Twain—lived in and/or wrote of the rural small town, and the genre promoted, as Kenneth Kidd puts it, “a language of delinquency that separated middle-class white kids from the criminal classes” (79). Through that “language” Boy Book authors often invoke a rhetoric akin to Hall’s, celebrating the unfettered play of the boy who acts out, either on his own or in gangs of peers, often flouting the authority of adult authority figures. For white middle-class boys, in the idealized small town, acts of mischief fit the script of “savage play” advocated by Hall and other character-builders. For immigrant boys, in the crowded inner city, acting “bad” connoted juvenile delinquency and served as a threatening harbinger of future criminal behavior.

As these disparate readings drive home, the Boy Book was written for adults as much, if not more so, as it was for boys. In this regard, these narratives not only serve the purpose of reminiscence and nostalgia but also gesture to something more practical. At a time when the domestic sphere seemed increasingly fragile, they offer a template for folding the wildness and autonomy of the middle-class boy safely within idealized notions of family.⁴ In doing so, Aldrich offers not only a work of fiction but, also, a (pseudo)scientific study of the American boy. Unsurprisingly then, Frank Norris, writing at the turn of the century, couches his (slightly tongue in cheek) description of the genre in terms that closely echo the developmentalist rhetoric of Turner and Hall. Norris describes a book targeting “the average American businessman” by appealing to his “early phases of primitive growth.” In dredging up those long lost days, Norris goes on, the Bad Boy book provides a value that is “vaguely scientific,” offering “the study of an extinct species” (qtd. in Jacobson, 2). The boy’s value, then, comes from his ability to facilitate the development of the adult man and, ultimately, he’s celebrated not for his

presence (as a boy) in the everyday world but for the presence of his memory, his status as an “extinct species” in the excavation of adult reminiscence.

1. Taking the Boy Book Out West

At first glance, Hamlin Garland’s 1899 novel *Boy Life on the Prairie* reads like a standard exercise in this kind of nineteenth century boyhood reminiscence. Jacobson traces *Boy Life on the Prairie* to a creative lull in Garland’s career. After publishing steadily throughout the 1870s and 80s, she notes that Garland floundered a bit, prompting a trip west for inspiration and to recover “the vanished western world of his youth” (99). Drawing from his observations on that trip, essays first published in *American* magazine in 1887, and poems from his 1893 collection *Prairie Songs*, Garland cobbled together *Boy Life on the Prairie*. The book was not offered as straight autobiography—Garland went on to publish *A Son of the Middle Border* for that purpose in 1917—but certainly fulfilled a number of criteria for the Boy Book genre including its celebration of unfettered (middle-class) boys at play and, most importantly, its privileging of boyhood, as Jacobson describes it, as a “condition of being that is truly vanished forever” (3).

However, Garland’s Boy Book extends the timeless space of boyhood beyond the borders of the American northeast; the story is set in Iowa in 1868. While Aldrich used the idea of the West as a reflection of the boyish imagination, Garland filters boyhood nostalgia through the lens of the frontier, presenting the untamed West as both a literal and metaphorical space of boyhood. In doing so, *Boy Life on the Prairie* projected American boyhood through the powerful mythos of the frontier, creating, the prototype for a type of Boy Book establishing the frontier as a space for idealized boyhood, while simultaneously mourning the disappearance of both frontier and boyhood alike.

At the start, twelve-year-old Lincoln Stewart moves west to Sun Prairie, Iowa to confront a childhood defined by punishing work and hardscrabble living. Despite these conditions, Garland romanticizes life on the prairie as a pure space of natural boyhood. In doing so, he stresses Lincoln's deep and abiding connection to the land, with the child's development from boy to man closely paralleling the land's development from wild prairie to domesticated farm. That Lincoln eventually outgrows both of these spaces and returns east is inevitable; he is no longer a boy, and the open land is no longer open. The loss of boyhood is, in fact, synonymous with the loss of the "open" frontier, and it works for Garland as a powerful engine of memory, a space enshrined in nostalgia and always just out of reach.

Garland's novel follows the Boy Book script quite closely. Lincoln moves exclusively in the world of boys and men—in this way, his days and nights cohere closely to the vision of late-nineteenth century boyhood culture that E. Anthony Rotundo describes in *Manhood in America*, wherein boys immersed themselves in "backyards, streets, parks, playgrounds, and vacant lots" and largely governed their own play (35). Throughout the novel, Lincoln remains deeply immersed in the homosocial world of boy's play, and the absence of any significant characters beyond his boyhood circle of friends is striking. Mothers, sisters, and girls from town garner occasional reference. Native Americans are evoked but never present. Likewise, the migration flows that sustained prairie life, and later served as dominant themes for Willa Cather and other authors of prairie fiction are completely absent. In short, *Boy Life on the Prairie* is very much a story about white middle-class boyhood, one in which Garland privileges boyhood as a sacred space and, like Turner, positions the rural farm as an ideal place for

a boy to grow into the right kind of a man. Outside of the boy and that space, nothing else seems to matter.

At the same time, *Boy Life on the Prairie* clearly juxtaposes this sacred space of boyhood with the specific geography of Garland's recollected youth. Unlike the boys Rotundo describes, Lincoln plays in fields and rivers rather than streets and vacant lots. More importantly, Lincoln does not enjoy the same freedom from adult responsibility that his (fictional) eastern counterparts so thoroughly do. Macleod notes that the typical Boy Book reveres the rural as an ideal space of middle-class boyhood, while recognizing actual farm life as far from the boy's lived experience. In the early part of the nineteenth century, he argues, farm fathers "demanded that their sons work hard from an early age," though by century's midpoint, the growing emphasis on public schools and the rise of the small town had "opened up a more leisured boyhood" (52). Garland's Lincoln does not enjoy such liberties. Rather than training to be Frank Norris's "average American businessman," he trains to be an actual farmer.

This distinction hints at a significant tension authors of literary boyhood faced in the second half of the nineteenth century—a tension only exacerbated in imagining boyhood through narratives of the American frontier. As Kenneth Kidd points out, G. Stanley Hall's own "memoir of boy life participates in a larger late-nineteenth century narrative closing of the frontier farm," a narrative that culminates in Turner's frontier thesis (36). In this way, Turner's story of the West serves as an exclamation point for the American agrarian myth articulated by Hall and many of the Boy Book authors. In moving the Boy Book to the frontier, Garland attempts to sustain this narrative, marking

both the frontier and boyhood alike as timeless spaces, perpetual resources to fuel the narrative of American progress.

Boy Life on the Prairie is something of a throwback, then, a return to the virtuous farm life boy other Boy Book authors realized only through reverie. Garland's Lincoln engages in far more work than play, and the book parallels his growth closely to the seasons of planting and harvesting the family's corn crop. Understandably then, Lincoln attests to being "fond of school," which represented "a chance to get clear of farm work and also it afforded him an opportunity to meet his fellows" (21). Nonetheless, school is a rare luxury, as the needs of the family farm come first. In their first year on the farm, the family can't afford to hire out for plowing, so ten year old Lincoln takes on the backbreaking labor himself. Throughout the book, the boy's work on the farm proves long, demanding, and even painful; at the same time, work is also rewarding, as Garland describes in his account of seeding time:

Day by day, the boys walked their monotonous rounds upon the ever-mellowing soil. They saw the geese pass on to the north, and the green grass come into the sunny slopes. They answered the splendid challenge of the solitary crane, and watched the ground sparrow build her lowly nest. Their muscles grew firm and their toil tired them less. (67)

As the boys cultivate the land, the land cultivates them. And, in fact, this symbiotic relationship between Lincoln and the land strongly echoes the confrontation between civilized pioneer and untrammled nature that informs the mythos of American identity formation promulgated by Turner and Hall. The ideological core of this rhetoric imagines the frontier as a collision of the savage and civilized, a sort of incubator, where the distinct American character is forged by the interaction between the settler and the savage. We see this manifested in Lincoln's cultivation of the land and, also, in the kind

of savage play Hall promoted. Lincoln and his friends ride the range, camp out, hunt, and even stage a cockfight. Gathered together at an Easter picnic, the boys cook their eggs and something “primeval and poetic clustered about this vernal camp-fire...They had returned to the primitive, to the freedom of the savage” (58-59).

Still, if *Boy Life on the Prairie* positions the western farm as a space of natural boyhood, it fails to envision it as a tenable space for actual boys. As Lincoln gets older, he grows increasingly tired of the monotonous toil of farming. “After a Sunday of riding about on their ponies, with their friends,” he and his friends find it “very hard to return to the stern toil of Monday morning” (69). As these tensions escalate, Lincoln yearns to escape the increasing drudgery of farm work. He can’t wait to leave—to go back east for schooling. This discontinuity, as Jacobson describes it, emerges as the driving force of Garland’s boy book, a “sharp sense of the contrast between the beauty of the rural past and the bleakness of industrialized contemporary life” (102). Confronting the bleakness of the present, Lincoln loses his connection to the land—to the space of boyhood itself. As he notes earlier, “All the boys he knew—all the young men talked of ‘the West,’” never of the East; always of the plains and the mountains and cattle-raising and mining and Indians” (90). On the precipice of adulthood, though, Lincoln turns away from the West; Garland’s utopian vision of the agrarian West crumbles as the boy becomes a man.

If the path to successful middle-class adulthood pulls east, as Aldrich and others had clearly established, Garland stubbornly attempts to preserve the west as a site for nostalgic recovery, a powerful space where memory simultaneously creates and erases. At the end of *Boy Life on the Prairie*, Lincoln returns to Sun Prairie. He’s an adult now and finds “a changed world in 1884, a land of lanes and fields and groves of trees...No

prairie sod could be found. Every quarter-section, every acre was ploughed. The wild flowers were gone...The very air seemed tamed and set to work at windmills whose towers rose high above every barn, like great sunflowers” (311). As Garland writes in his introduction, he’s describing “a vanished world—that of the prairie—much more deeply buried than my words at the ending of this book would indicate” (vii-viii). As an “historian of homely Middle Border family life” (vi), Garland struggles to preserve that absent world, enmeshed as it is with the idealized space of boyhood.

As Jacobson suggests, the successful Boy Book strives to offer more than just nostalgia for the past. Importantly, the book offers the adult reader critical tools for use in the present and future. In the book’s final chapters, Garland suggests that if the physical space of boyhood appears lost, it still lives within the narrator, providing him with a kind of double-consciousness. In the last chapter, Lincoln confronts Agnes, a woman he knew as child. As Garland describes it, she “seemed two persons. At one moment he saw her with the eyes of awestruck boyhood, and the next, to him, she was a pale young woman, painfully shy” (316). Being able to see through the “eyes of awestruck boyhood,” Lincoln sees more as a man than he could as a boy, and this double vision marks a triumphant arc of development. Much like Turner’s pioneer, Lincoln has not only survived his encounter with the primitive, he has successfully absorbed the primitive, emerging from the boyhood zone of the frontier as a powerful, successful model of American manhood. Sharing Turner’s vision, Garland’s *Boy Life on the Prairie* celebrates the triumph of the American farmer and trumpets the space of the farm as a place for developing boys into the right kind of men.

Garland's insistence on the sustaining power of this agrarian myth is remarkable. In 1893, he offered the scene of Lincoln's return home in a (fictionalized) 1884. Six years earlier, in 1887, the author had spoken out forcefully to a Boston audience about the failed promise of westward migration. Declaring the notion of "free land is a myth," Garland argues that for the ambitious girl or boy, the western farm "is a living grave, a solitude that eats out the life and hope and joy of life (qtd. in Pizer, in the *Standard*, 403-4). Despite this grim analysis, *Boy Life on the Prairie* situates the frontier as an ideal space of boyhood. Struggling to establish the West as a cultural bulwark against the East, Garland alternates between reverie and despair over the vanishing frontier farm. Open western spaces become crowded; the wild becomes cultivated. The prairie is dotted with fences as individual family farms are inevitably absorbed into small town communities. Lincoln returns home to a frontier farm, that's always vanishing, a regenerative vision Garland struggled to reconcile with the stark realities of western farm life.

2. Savagery, Delinquency, and Ideal Boyhood

Other Boy Book authors imagined the American boy not through the land of the frontier but through the "savages" that inhabited it. Most notable among these is Mark Twain. Critics often include both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in assessments of the nineteenth century Boy Book. Of course, there are striking differences between the two novels, most prominently in terms of form. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, like Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy* or Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie*, takes shape from the author's life projected backward. As Jacobson points out, following Aldrich's model, Tom Sawyer's story "recaptures the past" for the author's use in the present. If, as William Dean Howells famously claims, Twain's novel

creates an ideal “study of the boy-mind,” that study is not so much about how the boy lives but how the man remembers. In this way, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* follows the Boy Book template, even if Twain initially resisted that label. After all, it was only after significant cajoling from both his wife and Howells, who insisted to Twain that he “he ought to treat it explicitly *as* a boy’s story,” that Twain declared the novel “a book for boys, pure & simple” (Smith and Gibson, 112-113).

Twain’s relationship to the Boy Book was tenuous from the start then, and in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he breaks with the genre’s tradition and turns to Huck as his narrator. The ramifications of this shift in point of view have received no lack of critical scrutiny, and certainly, the author’s decision to adopt Huck’s perspective is at least partially responsible for making the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as Jacobson puts it, “something more than a boy book,” elevating the novel beyond genre exercise to the realm of American masterpiece.⁵ At the same time, the transition from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is all about boyhood, namely Twain’s efforts to imagine the ideal American boy. In that regard, Twain’s decision to focus on Huck signifies the shift from Aldrich’s model of the “Good Bad Boy” to a fractious vision of the boy-savage.

To this day, Huck Finn remains an iconic figure of boyhood, and the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*’s famous last lines endure as a potent signifier for the familiar metaphor of escape that dominated the golden age of children’s literature and Turner’s frontier thesis alike. Of course, heading out to the “Territory” represents more than escape for both Huck and his creator. Richard Slotkin argues that while Huck ultimately rejects both “the world of romantic illusion” and the series of realities he’s been offered

at the novel's conclusion, he "has still not abandoned the hope of finding his way to the mythic frontier" (*Fatal*, 521). In fact, Twain meant to pursue just this narrative line in *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians*, a sequel taken up immediately after he finished the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884.

Twain's unfinished novel has drawn tepid interest from scholars. Typically, the manuscript gets lumped together with other minor works from Twain featuring both Tom and Huck, notably *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, 1894, and *Tom Sawyer, Detective*, 1896. However, this assessment fails to account for the unique relationship *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* enjoys to its immediate predecessor. The other Tom and Huck novels, the first of which was released a decade after the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are both lighthearted burlesques. More importantly, both novels serve as a redirection more than a continuation of narrative themes dominant in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While both later novels employ Huck as a narrator, they also—as the titles imply—relegate him to the sidekick status he enjoyed in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. What's more, the chronology of the two books picks up right after the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, effectively erasing Tom and Huck's trip to the frontier from the record. In the end, only Twain's first attempted sequel sought to develop the vision of boyhood sketched out in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and in this abandoned project, and its subsequent erasure from the "official" chronology of Tom and Huck, we see the failure to realize that vision, of Twain's inability to move away from a "study" of the "boy-mind" and toward a grander project constructing a model of American boyhood through frontier savagery.

Twain, unlike Garland, did not grow up on a farm, but his impulse to situate the boy out west is not surprising. Throughout his career Twain maintained a strong connection to the American West. In fact, in 1861, at the age of 26 and before establishing himself as a writer, he headed to Nevada, remaining there for the better part of the decade and mining these experiences for his 1872 travel narrative *Roughing It*. The West remained a point of fascination for Twain long after he returned to the East and became a fixture in Hartford literary circles. At the same time, in the wake of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain clearly hadn't given up on Huck Finn as a vision of ideal boyhood. All in all, it makes perfect sense that he would look to explore connections between natural boyhood and the American frontier.

That Twain ultimately abandoned the project is as telling as the fact that he conceived it. As Dahlia Armon and Walter Blair describe it, Twain intended *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* as an open refutation of James Fenimore Cooper's fiction—most notably the figure of the Noble Indian—in a favor of a more realistic portrayal of frontier conditions. In preparing the manuscript then, he read widely amongst the memoirs of army officers, most prominently Richard Irving Dodge's *Our Wild Indians*, 1883, alongside accounts by Francis Parkman and De Benneville Randolph Keim. By Armon and Blair's account, Twain achieved his goal too well, rendering a scenario too realistic to see through to its grisly finish; that scenario was the kidnapping of a young white woman by a band of Indians, with Tom and Huck in hot pursuit. Based on the "authorities" Twain had turned to, the only outcome for the girl was rape, and, as such, Armon and Blair speculate, Twain could not continue with the story (271–272).

The notion that *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* became too

violent for Twain's liking is a curious one. After all, Twain's writing had long associated violence with the American West. Brooding hostility permeates the action in *Roughing It*, whether it be through the narrative's frequent exchanges of gunplay or the inevitable carnage brought about by imposing civic structure on a volatile, often hostile environment. Sydney Krause describes the world Twain invokes in *Roughing it* as one where "the ritual of violence not only characterizes a region; it articulates an impatient population, and materializes an American myth that problems must yield to force" (44-45). Joseph Coulombe reads the violence of *Roughing It* less as a product of a region and more as the author's brash attempt at self-stylization. Through manipulating the tone and language in the book, Coulombe argues, Twain draws upon "a new set of gender ideals for men," pitting western and eastern stereotypes of masculinity against each other and presenting "himself as a violent outlaw whose weapon of choice was a pen" (48).

Roughing It is hardly a book for children. Still, Twain's famous books for boys contain liberal doses of violence in their own right; the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is notable in this regard. From the start—in fact before the novel starts—Huck is surrounded by violence. The son of the town drunk, he lives under the constant threat of terror and abuse so powerful it initiates his initial flight to Jackson Island and marks the beginning of his trip down the river. In the course of his journey, Huck encounters the feuding Grangerfords, quickly befriend young Buck Grangerford only to watch him and a nineteen year-old cousin promptly get mowed down in a gunfight. Later, he witnesses Colonel Sherburn murder a drunk in the middle of the street, in front of his daughter, and then stare down the lynch mob that forms to seek retribution. And of course, the swindling Duke and the King, who commandeer Huck's raft for a time and

ultimately sell Jim back into slavery, are last seen in the novel being tarred and feathered. In many instances, the violence is “playful,” as with the series of indignities (or tortures) Tom Sawyer devises for Jim in the novel’s bewildering end game; nonetheless, Huck Finn’s journey down river is rife with violence from beginning to end. It’s strange then to think that *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* became too violent for Twain. Perhaps the combination of murderous Indians and their virginal young white victim suggested possibilities that even he couldn’t stomach. Considering his track record, though, and his long-standing association of the west with violence, this sudden squeamishness deserves further scrutiny.

Twain’s failure to complete the manuscript is especially intriguing in light of the connections—and disconnections—between *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* and its predecessor. As Armon and Blair point out, Twain dove into the story in July of 1884 while looking over the galleys for the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, reinforcing the strong sense of continuity between the two books. If the famous ending of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* suggests an uncertain future for the novel’s narrator and protagonist, Twain’s failure to complete the sequel only emphasizes that uncertainty. Ultimately, his failure to continue Huck’s journey westward reveals the unresolved tensions undermining the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*’s construction of ideal boyhood.

In the course of that novel, of course, Huck replaces Tom Sawyer as Twain’s ideal American boy. With that move, the author rejects the Romanticism of Sir Walter Scott and Cooper in favor of a powerful vision of G. Stanley Hall’s boy-savage. Throughout the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain increasingly uses Huck’s

character as both corrective to Tom—perhaps even to the autobiographical form of the Boy Book itself—and as a prototype of authentic boy-savagery. Hall wanted educators to realize that, for the adolescent, “books and reading are distasteful, for the very soul and body cry out for a more active, objective life, and to know nature and man first hand” (*Adolescence*, xi), and Huck embodies this doctrine. His plainspoken narrative repudiates Tom’s sentimental storybook vernacular, while his escape down the river with Jim reveals Tom’s adventures with his gang of robbers to be no more than play-acting. Huck says as much directly early on in the book, before he begins his journey down river, dismissing Tom’s story of Aladdin’s lamp as “just one of Tom Sawyer’s lies.” While Tom may have “believed in the A-rabs and the elephants,” Huck states firmly he does not. For him, such tall tales “have all the marks of a Sunday school” (26).

Turning to Huck also signifies an important geographical shift for Twain. Reviewing the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Howells points out that Twain “has taken a boy of the Southwest for his hero,” providing “the best picture of life in that region as yet known to fiction.” The inhabitant of a “shabby little Mississippi town,” Tom Sawyer still “belongs to the better sort of people in it,” and Howells singles him out as a clear corollary to Aldrich’s Tom Bailey as a paragon of the good bad boy. Huck Finn, on the other hand, is as Howells describes it, a “worthless vagabond” (qtd. in Scharnhorst, 21). He doesn’t belong to the better class of people in the town—or in the town at all for that matter. Correspondingly, in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it’s the structure of the town itself with its smugness, insularity, and hypocrisy that suppresses Huck. In response, Twain pushes the novel’s action out into untamed nature,

configuring it, much as Garland does with Lincoln Stewart, as a space of idealized boyhood.

These narrative moves distance the reader from Tom, who yearns for a “higher level of civilization,” while placing the spotlight on Huck, who wants no civilization at all. Huck aspires, as Leslie Fielder points out, “to the “deeper level of primitive” in Jim (282), and “it’s only in moments of weakness that he turns away from Jim and “the instinctive life” to join Tom in “the world of make-believe, which is also a prison” (279). Of course the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contains *so many* of those moments of weakness that Twain’s intentions regarding Huck invariably eventually become muddled, an effect felt most prominently in the novel’s final section, where the boys take on the elaborate “rescue” of Jim. Just as importantly, the presence of Jim, a “true” noble savage, actually underscores Huck’s tenuous relationship to nature. Returning to the disparate narratives of frontier history offered by William Cody and Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* tries (unsuccessfully) to split the difference. Unlike Garland’s Lincoln, Huck neither cultivates the land—nor becomes cultivated through it. On the other hand, he engages but certainly doesn’t conquer the savage other: in fact, Huck requires Jim’s mediation to access that “deeper level of primitive.”

There are moments when life on the river sustains Twain’s vision of the boy-savage. Through Jim’s stewardship, simply being in nature becomes adventure enough for Huck, who savors the time with his primitive guide, simply “lazying down the river, listening to the stillness.” While once his simple clothing marked a contrast with Tom, now Huck abandons clothing altogether: “we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us.” When he comes into a set of new clothes, Huck quickly

rejects them as “too good to be comfortable, and besides, I didn’t go much on clothes, nohow” (136). All things considered, Huck concludes, “It’s lovely to live on a raft” (136); however, the loveliness of life on the river is constantly disrupted. It’s disrupted when they’re forced to leave the raft for shore, as when Huck lands with the Grangerfords, and gets caught in the middle of their brutal feud. It’s disrupted when the shore comes to them, as well, notably in the personage of the Duke and the King, whose duplicitous behavior proves “enough to make a body ashamed of the human race” (176). Such disruptions are needed, of course, to move the novel along, but they reveal cracks forming in Twain’s idealized vision of savage boyhood, as Huck vacillates uneasily from the “pure” life on the river to the degraded civilization flourishing at its shores.

In large part these cracks reflect the powerful class tensions simmering beneath the surface in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In rejecting Tom Sawyer, Twain also rejects the safety net of middle-class domesticity, a decision that becomes increasingly problematic toward the novel’s end. As Kenneth Kidd explains, any threat posed by the mischievous antics celebrated in the typical Bad Boy books is tempered by the inability of the protagonists to lapse into any kind of serious delinquency. Tom Bailey and Tom Sawyer are, as Kidd puts it, “middle-class white boys” configured as “gentle and temporary savages” (55). Huck, however, isn’t a middle-class white boy and the line between him and delinquency is razor thin. Appraising the novel’s final chapters, Kidd argues that “Huck’s rebirth as Tom, and his acquiescence in Tom’s wild schemes, suggests a merger of the social outcast with the socially sanctioned Bad Boy” (80). Alternately, this rebirth can be read not as a merger of the two but a reappraisal of the latter, and, by extension a fraught interrogation of the viability of boy-savagery. In this

contentious final section, Twain seems stuck between two imperfect possibilities: the middle-class boy, corrupted by his inability to access the truly savage, and the working-class boy corrupted by his ability to access the same.

These class tensions come to the surface in a scene where Huck steals a watermelon. He calls it borrowing, though Tom insists that “it warn’t borrowing, it was stealing” (250), and he compels Huck to leave a dime in place of the missing fruit. Huck, as ever, proves the more practical of the two, and arguably comes closer to truth here, insisting that when the times comes “to steal a nigger, or a watermelon, or a Sunday school book, I ain’t no ways particular how it’s done, so it’s done” (254). Clearly, though, this is not the kind of truth esteemed in the middle-class value system promoted by pedagogues like Hall—precisely the value system in which Tom Sawyer has been raised. For a lower-class boy like Huck, a bit of “playful” thievery will more likely be read as juvenile delinquency than Bad Boy mischief, and by the time he’s written his characters to the Phelps plantation, Twain seems painfully aware of this problem. From stealing watermelons, one can easily see Huck fulfilling his angry promise “to take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it” (223).

These cracks stand out as deep fissures by the end of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Twain seems at a loss for what to do with Huck. Importantly, like Garland’s Lincoln, Huck straddles the line of white middle-class boyhood, and, notably, both boys engage with, react against, and grow through their exposure to savagery. Unlike Huck, though, Lincoln enjoys not only the safety of family but a powerful connection to the land; the virtue of work contributes both to his growth and demonstrates the resilience of the middle-class family. In Garland’s vision—much as in

Hall's farm memoir—the redemptive character of labor develops the boy into the man. For Lincoln, his struggles are represented directly by his cultivation of the wild into the domestic.

Ultimately, Huck is wedded to his liminality, equally distanced from civilized and uncivilized alike. Twain's vacillating projections of Huck spotlight the specter of delinquency haunting both the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and its abandoned sequel. A few critics have suggested Twain's focus on nascent fears of juvenile delinquency, and not race, resonated most with contemporary readers of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.⁶ Certainly, Huck may have frightened adult readers with visions of his incipient criminality. Still, in the world of Hannibal, he is an outlier, while Tom Sawyer's gang of robbers signifies merely play-acting, rather than any significant threat to social order. Removing Huck and Tom to the frontier is another matter entirely. The dime novel western (Chapter One), presents the frontier as a radical space, one where adolescent figures became empowered, autonomous, and threatening. By moving Huck and Tom to this setting, Twain could only have fanned the flames of contemporary concerns about juvenile delinquency.

Unsurprisingly then, Twain struggles to mediate conflicting notions of boy-savagery throughout *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians*. In that novel, Huck once again takes on the role of narrator, but Jim is dispensed with as the savage "other." In fact, by the book's third chapter, Jim is gone, kidnapped by Indians along with the Mills girls, Peggy and Flaxy, seventeen and seven years old respectively. Tom, Huck, and Jim fall in with the Mills family on a wagon road, and Huck declares them "the simple-heartedest good-naturedest country folks in the world." Unfortunately, as Huck

describes it, the family “didn’t know hardly anything,” (40) and the father, mother, and sons are easily tricked and then butchered by duplicitous Indians who then make off with Jim and the girls. What’s more, it’s quickly clear that in this new environment, neither Tom nor Huck knows much either. After the Indian party absconds with Jim and the surviving Mills girls, the boys pledge to rescue them. They’re helpless to do so on their own, however, and are forced to wait for help to arrive. Sitting up in the tall grass, they grow hungry without food, and Huck takes stock of their surroundings, describing “the biggest, widest, levelest world—and all dead; dead and still and not a sound. The loneliest place that ever was; enough to break a body’s heart just to listen to the awful stillness of it” (49).

3. Twain’s New Frontier: From Plow to Gun

Marooned in the prairie grass, Huck finds himself far from the idyllic river he floated down with Jim and completely unable to read the landscape. In place of this primitive spirit guide, we have the savage Indian, a figure Twain regarded with great skepticism—if not outright disdain. The bloodthirsty Indians in *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer Among the Indians* are clearly intended to debunk the very notion of the Noble Savage—to show the “real” nature of the Plains Indians—and that intention is revealed through a pair of comments by Tom Sawyer. Early on, while trying to persuade Jim and Huck on the virtues of westward exploration, Tom describes the Indians “as the noblest human beings that’s ever been in the world” (35). Later, while stuck in the tall grass, Huck asks Tom “where did you learn about Injuns—how noble they was, and all that?” Huck quickly sees that he’s hit his friend “hard, very hard,” and Tom looks away. Finally, “he said ‘Cooper’s novels,’ and didn’t say anything more” (50).

Critics continue to debate Twain's true opinion of Native-Americans, but there's little question that his published writings often offer harsh portrayals of them. Helen Harris convincingly argues that, for much of his career, the author portrayed Native Americans as "more ludicrously degraded than the usual stereotype, disparaging them mostly for their poverty, diet and culture" (495-496). Unlike Jim, then, the Indian presents Twain with a much more hostile savage, one much more suitable for William Cody's narrative of civilizing the West. These savages appear as less than human, serving as clear obstructions to the forces of civilization and presenting a threat that requires a hostile response. In *Tom and Huck Among The Indians*, Twain moves from Turner's vision of ideal boyhood read through the western landscape to a vision, like William Cody's, predicated on the conquest of the unruly savage.

Ultimately, though, that vision does not hold. On the desolate and foreboding plains, Tom's storybook logic is as useless as ever—in fact, even more so; it's Tom who's chiefly responsible for the trio's venturing out west and for Jim's capture. At the same time, Huck's connection to the land, felt so powerfully in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, has been severed as well. The logical solution is for the boys to adapt to these hostile situations, conforming to a vision of the pioneer more like Cody's battle-tested scout than Turner's peaceful farmer. In fact, Twain takes some steps in this direction. Before the Indians arrive and murder most of the Mills party, the boys practice riding, shooting, and roping to the extent that, as Huck boasts, "we got powerful good at them." Tom, proves able "to cave in a squirrel's or a wild turkey's or a prairie chicken's head any fair distance; and could send both loads from his pistol through your hat on a full gallop, at twenty yards" (41). Huck, ever more practical, kills a rattlesnake when the

boys are marooned, and then “skinned and roasted him in the hot embers” on a fire they’d managed to build (51). Both boys seem capable of taking on the trappings of the archetypal western hero; however, Twain turns to a separate character, Brace Johnson, to fill this role. It’s Brace, Peggy Mills’ fiancée, whom the boys are waiting for in the tall prairie grasses, and Brace who’s described, as Albert Stone, Jr. puts it, as a “pure dime-novel stereotype” (175). As Twain describes Brace:

He was more than six foot tall, I reckon, and had broad shoulders, and he was straight as a jackstaff, and built thin as a race-horse. He had the steadiest eye you ever see, and a handsome face, and his hair hung all down his back, and how he ever could keep his outfit so clean and nice, I never could tell, but he did. . . . And as for strength, I never see a man that was any more than half as strong as what he was, and a most lightning marksman with a gun or a bow or a pistol. (60)

This dime novel hero is a natural born pioneer in the Cody mode, set up to exterminate Indians and other miscreants alike. Huck gets to see these exploits first hand when Brace shoots down two horse thieves. Afterwards, Huck notes, “We had two dead men on our hands, and I felt pretty crawly, and didn’t like to look at them.” At the same time, as Brace points out, and the boy concedes, “it warn’t a very unpleasant sight, considering they tried to kill me” (73).

These seem like precisely the right exercises to help develop Huck from “vagabond” boy to masculine frontier hero. Twain intimates just this development earlier on, after Tom and Huck first explain to Brace how they ended up out west. After hearing about Tom’s idyllic visions of the Indian, “Brace said it was just like boys the world over, and just the same way it was with him when he was a boy” (54). After traveling out west, though, the callow boy grew into the seasoned pioneer, and Brace’s remarks suggest a similar trajectory for Huck, or even Tom. Despite his obvious fondness for dime novels, Twain did not complete that trajectory.⁷ The author may have confronted

the violence of the frontier or the brutal possibilities of the plot he'd sketched out, but ultimately he couldn't reconcile that violence with his characterization of American boyhood. In the end, once Huck actually finds his way to the frontier, the model of the boy-savage goes from slightly untenable to completely unsustainable.

Ultimately, in *Boy Life on the Prairie* and *Tom and Huck Among the Indians*, both Garland and Twain struggle to reconcile the mythos of the frontier with visions of ideal boyhood. Each author attempts to articulate an idea of American middle-class boyhood through the space of the frontier and the negotiation of the savage and civilized. In each case, the effort results in a product notably out of step with the author's remaining body of work. In part these struggles are aesthetic, stemming from each author's inability to mediate between competing notions of Romanticism and Realism.

Garland was a staunch advocate of literary realism. In fact, he saw the realist mode as a critical tool in developing a distinctly American literature, one not slavishly reliant on European tradition. In *Crumbling Icons*, Garland's 1894 manifesto for this literary project, he argues that the American academy has become dominated by a "conservative criticism" that "worships the past, despises the present, and fears the future." The result, he concludes, is "an impoverished generation of American writers. (11). Looking to Europe for their models, these writers "have been taught to imitate, not create," an effect most powerfully felt in "the mighty West, with its teeming millions," a place that "remains undelineated in the novel" (16). Garland sets west against east, with the former representing a site of untapped literary potential, and the latter representing a stubborn relic of the past. Nonetheless, Garland looks eastward in holding Howells up as a paragon of the new American realism. "Realism," as Garland describes it in a defense

of Howells's novels, "is not a theory but a condition of mind upon which a law is founded." The realist author "does not write of common things so much because he hates romantic things as because he loves actualities" (Garland, *Mr. Howells*, 49).

This love of actualities remained a hallmark of Garland's own novels, which, as Donald Pizer describes them, were motivated by "a conscious rejection of the conventional myth of the West" (xv). As noted earlier, this zeal does not carry over to *Boy Life on the Prairie*, published just six years after *Crumbling Icons*. The bulk of Garland's prairie stories trade in gritty realism, setting out to expose the ugly truth of frontier farm life, and the "actualities of life" do seem to grind Lincoln Stewart down, closing in on the idealized space of boyhood. Still, Garland ultimately cloaks *Boy Life on the Prairie* in saccharine nostalgia. A remarkable discontinuity resonates in these disparate western visions, with the rosy promise of Garland's boyhood memories struggling to exist as anything but a memorial for a vanished time and place. Ultimately, he can't reconcile a realist vision of the West with his Romantic notions of boyhood.

Though lumped in with the realist movement, partly through his connection to Howells, Twain was nowhere near as vocal as Garland in advocating a realist school—or any school, for that matter. Nonetheless, Twain's disdain for Romanticism has been duly noted, and as noted earlier, his particular scorn for Cooper served as a major impetus for Twain in the initial conception of *Tom and Huck Among the Indians*. Twain saw the novel as a corrective to Romantic misrepresentations of the West, relying on his own experiences as a young man alongside the memoirs of scouts and soldiers to forge a more realistic vision of frontier life. Like Garland, though, the grim realism of the west proved incompatible with the Romantic trappings of idealized American boyhood. For Twain,

putting Tom and Huck out among the Indians means creating a space where boyhood can be imagined but not idealized.

Attempting to revitalize the Boy Book through the space of the West, both Twain and Garland imagined the frontier as a space of growth and development. In this way, their efforts parallel Hall's theories of child development and Turner's theories of American history. In a (conscious?) nod to Hall, Garland adds "A Recapitulatory After-Word" to *Crumbling Icons*. In this brief section, he exhorts America's young men and women to action: "Turn your back on the past, not in scorn but in justice to the future" (143). This is a literary call-to-arms, one Garland frames in evolutionary terms. "In evolution," he explains, "there are always two vast fundamental forces: one, the inner which propels; the other, the outer which adapts and checks" (144). For Garland, and for Twain, both forces are at work in the American frontier and in the American boy. Ultimately, though, neither author manages to idealize white American boyhood through frontier narrative. Garland paints a rosy picture of plains life but outside of the daily toil of farm work; little in the book seems real or meaningful. Twain, of course, couldn't even finish his novel, returning Huck to the supporting role he performed in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

4. Blending Romance and Realism: Buffalo Bill's Performance of Boyhood.

A third literary attempt at integrating narratives of the frontier and American boyhood comes from an author with little to no literary reputation speak of. As Buffalo Bill, William Cody became the nineteenth century's most powerful symbol of frontier mythos, a feat achieved in no small part through his ability to seamlessly fuse the realistic and the romantic. When he published his autobiography in 1879, Cody was already a

multifaceted celebrity. He had gone from renowned Indian scout to dime novel hero ten years earlier with the publication of *Ned Buntline's Buffalo Bill, the King of the Bordermen*. Shortly after that he became a stage star, acting out his dime novel exploits in freewheeling frontier dramas. Cody formed the traveling theatrical troupe, the “Buffalo Bill Combination” in 1873 and ten years later starred in the hybrid performance genre of the “Wild West” show, profoundly shaping the transmission and articulation of American frontier mythology forever.

Coming in the midst of his transition from stage star to Wild West impresario, the writing and publication of Cody's autobiography at first seems oddly timed. Cody had dominated the pages of sensational literature in those years and clearly had his sights set on different—and more profitable—models of performance. Perhaps he saw the autobiography as a vital publicity tool for developing his career. At the same time, it's possible Cody sought to issue a gentle corrective to portrayals of his life in blood and thunder stories. As Cody biographer Don Russell points out, while most dime novels about real persons were pseudo-biographical,” only rarely did “a Buffalo Bill dime novel bear any relation to anything ever done by the real Cody” (403). Whatever Cody's motives may have been, the resulting book remains a fascinating mixture of genres and a powerful example of the vivid interaction between American boyhood and frontier mythos in the second half of the nineteenth century.

By the time *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody, Known as Buffalo Bill* was published, Cody was a show-business veteran who readily understood the value of tailoring his appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Partly, this entailed pitching his exploits to the “right kind” of boys. As Louis Warren describes, the first run of the

Buffalo Bill's Wild West came under criticism for its appeal to bootblacks, newsboys, and other "lower class elements"; in other words, it appealed to the same audience as the Buffalo Bill dime novels (241). Eventually, Cody would hook up with a new business partner, Nate Salsbury. Cody and Salsbury made a number of changes to the show, creating a product more likely to appeal to the middle-class family and, in particular, the middle-class boy.

The Life of Honorable William F. Cody, Known as Buffalo Bill was clearly tailored to middle-class readers as well. The book was published by Frank Bliss's American Publishing, which published a number of Twain's works including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. While Cody's autobiography is not a Boy Book, it reprises the genre's central conceit of a successful man looking back at his adventurous boyhood. In contrast to most Buffalo Bill fiction, which rarely focused on the hero as a boy, much of the autobiography deals with Cody's childhood. Right from the start, the author tries on the tone and language of the Boy Book. Describing his "childhood days," Cody confesses, "I often wonder that I did not get drowned while swimming or sailing, or my neck broken while I was stealing apples in the neighborhood orchards" (19). Early on, Cody lived, like Garland's Lincoln Stewart, in Iowa, where he "was sent to school more for the purpose of being kept out of mischief than to learn anything" (21).

Cody's narrative moves quickly from the peaceful Iowa territory to his family's 1852 migration to (still unsettled) Kansas. The risks of stealing apples are immediately replaced by more daunting challenges; on the trip, Cody recounts seeing "men carrying pistols and knives for the first time" and notes, "they looked like a dangerous crowd" (33). That danger soon proved quite real. All in all, while Cody's boyhood recollections

indulge in (and embellish) his many colorful adventures on the western plains, they're also grounded in the Cody family's harrowing struggles. Cody's father, Isaac, was an outspoken abolitionist, whose presence amidst the Kansas-Missouri border wars of the 1850s quickly became an incendiary one.⁸ In the chapter, "Boy Days in Kansas," Cody recounts witnessing his father speaking out against slavery, only to watch on helplessly as a "hot-headed pro-slavery man" pulls "out a huge bowie knife" and stabs the elder Cody twice.

Lucky to escape with his life, Isaac Cody becomes something of a fugitive and often remained in hiding when home. William notes these developments with notable stoicism, admitting that his father's "indiscreet speech ... brought upon our family all of the misfortunes and difficulties which from that time on befell us" (49). Sure enough, persecuted by their pro-slavery neighbors, the Codys struggled to make ends meet and four years after being stabbed, Isaac Cody died. William was only ten years old, and from this point forward he became the family's primary wage earner.

Perhaps not coincidentally, after Cody leaves home and goes to work, the story takes on more of the tone and feel of sensational literature. After the Cody family has settled into their new home in the Salt Creek Valley, Cody describes encountering a "genuine western man." This character, who later turns out to be Cody's long-lost cousin Horace Billings, "was about six feet two inches tall, was well built, and had a light, springy and wiry step. He wore a broad-brimmed California hat, and was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, beautifully trimmed and beaded" (35). Cody soon becomes better acquainted with the stranger, who shows him how to properly break ponies. As the Californian later explains he "was raised on horseback," having run away from home as a

boy, gone to sea and eventually joined a circus, where he became “a celebrated bare-back rider.” Later, drawn to California by the gold rush, he learned the trade of “bocarro-catching and breaking wild horses” (37). This romantic portrait seduces the seven-year-old Cody completely; he proclaims the Californian “a magnificent looking man,” admits he “envied his appearance,” and confesses his ambition “to become as skillful a horseman as he was” (41).

If the description seems reminiscent of Twain’s Brace Johnson, that’s surely no accident; Armon and Blair list Cody’s autobiography as one of the sources Twain consulted for *Tom and Huck Among the Indians*. What’s more, Twain is on record as a fervent admirer of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, writing that “it brought vividly back the breezy life of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, and stirred me like a war-song” (Christianson, xxvi). At the same time, it’s Cody, and not Twain, who fully integrates the dime novel hero with a literary model of white middle-class boyhood. In fact, Cody imbues his western upbringing with the glow of nostalgia, while using the stock heroics of boyhood adventures to fuel both his remembered past and his (not so) distinctive creation myth.

Of course, Cody’s autobiography is more amenable to such fictions, as his boyhood wishes to be like the bocarro-busting Californian are fait accompli by the time the account is set down on the page; the boy Cody has grown into the man known as Buffalo Bill. At the same time, Cody the author proves especially adept at integrating the domestic ideals of American boyhood with the violent realities of the frontier. Cody stabs a boy in the leg at school as a ten-year-old and kills his first Indian a year later. In each case, he embraces the violence of the act but takes pains to provide a clear moral

framework unlike the blood and thunder stories bearing his name. Cody stabs the (much bigger) boy, described as “the ‘bully’ of the school,” to defend “a sweetheart with whom I was ‘dead in love’—in a juvenile way” (64). He kills the Indian in clear self-defense and in the performance of duty, confessing afterwards to being “overcome with astonishment,” so shaken up, in fact, that “I could hardly realized what I had done” (72). The graphic nature of violence in the story is unflinching; at the same time, it plays a significant role in shaping boy into man. As Cody notes, from that time on, “I became a hero and an Indian killer ... my exploit created quite a sensation” (73).

As an author, Cody does all he can to bolster the effects of that “sensation.” That much becomes plain in comparing how he and his older sister, Julia Cody Goodman describe a scene when they were compelled to take up arms on their father’s behalf. As Cody describes it in his autobiography, “I determined that the man should never go up stairs where my father was lying in bed, unable to rise.” Acting quickly, then he fetches “a double-barreled pistol which I had recently bought” and stations himself at the top of the stairs. There, Cody “cocked the weapon and waited for the ruffian to come up, determined that the moment he set foot on the steps I would kill him” (59). In Julia’s memoir, she recalls being with her brother and father upstairs. Isaac tells them, “You will have to protect me because I am too sick. Willie you get your gun,” which always stood beside the stair door. “And Julie, you get the ax.” As the children move into action, Isaac provides further instruction: “If that man starts to come upstairs, Willie you shoot, and Julie, if Willie misses him you hit him with the ax” (9). The differences are notable. In Cody’s version, he acts alone, “determined” to kill the hostile intruder. In doing so, he replaces his father as protector of the house, taking on the steely demeanor

of the western hero. In his sister's version, young William's actions are essentially the same. It's the father, however, at the center of the action, directing the children. What's more, William does not act alone; rather, Julia is there, ax in hand, ready to join the fray.

This scene neatly encapsulates how William Cody infuses real life events with the tone and feel of sensational fiction in his autobiography. These efforts to navigate realism and romance were at least been partially successful in tempering the more familiar image of Buffalo Bill in blood and thunder fiction. As a reviewer for the *New York Herald* is quick to reassure: "We doubt whether the perusal of the book will lure a single boy to run away from school, steal a revolver and tramp to the border" (qtd. in Christianson, 470). Rather, the reviewer explains, Cody's story allows the boy reader to revel in dime novel exploits as pedagogy, framing the boy-hero's adventures as a powerful lesson about rough and tumble living on the frontier.

These negotiations help Cody suggest a new model of American boyhood constructed through the dynamic space of the frontier. An Indian-killer at eleven and a Pony Express rider at fourteen Cody doesn't present a boy dreaming of dime novel heroics but a fully realized boy-savage and frontier hero. Twain famously wrote of his ambitions to "take a boy of twelve & run him on through life (in the first person)." Tom Sawyer, he declares, "would not be a good character for it" (Smith and Gibson, 92). This moment is often invoked in tracing the genesis of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Of course, Twain proved unable to run Huck "on through life" as well. In his autobiography, Cody manages the task quite nicely, weaving the romance of his boyhood adventures together with hard realities of "civilizing" the frontier as he documents his growth from boy to man.

Cody, then, describes the boy hero without relegating boyhood to the distant realm of nostalgia; rather, he holds out the tantalizing possibility that frontier heroics could be lived as well as remembered, acted out again and again. His story serves not merely to recapture the past but, rather, to use that past to act out the present and the future. In doing so, Cody uses boyhood nostalgia to tap into the same complex—and to some degree paradoxical—paradigm that undergirds Turner's frontier thesis. Looking backwards and forwards at the same time, Cody puts the imagined space of the West in useful conversation with performance of his fictionalized memories of boyhood, creating a vision of the frontier narrative deeply imbued with the sensibilities of white middle-class boyhood. In the 1880s, that narrative would become a foundation of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Cody's most enduring projection of the frontier as a symbol of the America's potency and progress.

Endnotes

¹ For a history of the Boy Book, see Marcia Jacobson's *Being a Boy Again*. For additional analysis of the genre, including connections to nineteenth century character-building, see Kenneth Kidd, *Making American Boys*, Chapter Two.

² Richard White's "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill" takes note of the rich symbolism in both men's presence at the Columbian Exposition, analyzing their distinctive visions of the frontier and/as American history. In Chapter Two of *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin traces the history of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and sets it in ideological opposition to the White City at the Columbian Exposition.

³ In 1904, Hall published his two volume *Adolescence: It's Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, and Education*. For a thorough analysis of Hall's recapitulation theory through the lens of race, boyhood, and masculinity, see Gail Bederman, Chapter 3, "Teaching our Sons What We Have Been Teaching the Savages to Avoid: G. Stanley Hall, Racial Recapitulation, and the Neurasthenic Paradox."

⁴ See Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, Chapter Four, for an analysis of the American middle-class family in the northeast during the second half of the nineteenth century. See Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog, *Domestic Revolutions*, Chapter Six, for an account of perceived threats to this family structure and subsequent development of the companionate family beginning at the turn of the century.

⁵ Among the many critics of who considered Huckleberry Finn, authorial voice, and the Bad Boy book, I recommend Jeffrey Steinbrink, "Who Wrote *Huckleberry Finn*? Mark Twain's Control of the Early Manuscript" and Edwin Cady, *The Light of Common Day*, pages 96-119.

⁶ See Steven Mailloux, *Rhetorical Power*, 110-29 for more on Huck and juvenile delinquency. The theme is taken up more recently by Andrew Levy and serves as the focal point for his analysis of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in *Huck Finn's America*.

⁷ Michelle Ann Abate discusses Twain's fondness for the dime novel, speculating about his desire to write one, in "Bury My Heart in Recent History": Mark Twain's Hellfire Hotchkiss," the Massacre at Wounded Knee, and the Dime Novel Western."

⁸ See Anne Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 475-84 for an historical overview of the Kanas-Missouri border wars.

Chapter Three: The Wild West: Making History and American Boyhood

On September 14th, 1883, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran this brief story under the headline: “Missing Boys: Two Youngsters of Reading Infatuated with Buffalo Bill.”

William Dickinson, aged fourteen years, and William Stevenson, aged eleven, are missing since Monday, since which time nothing has been seen or heard of them. They both left home dressed with the intention of seeing Buffalo Bill. They had been in the habit of reading exciting stories such as Indian tales, etc., and it is supposed that they must have left with Buffalo Bill during Monday night. The mothers of the young lads are greatly worried, and if the boys do not return soon their minds might become deranged. Detectives have been notified and telegrams were sent to Harrisburg to Buffalo Bill, who is showing there today. No reply has yet been received.

In the 1880s, this type of story was not unusual. The disappearance of the two young Williams, their decision to “go west,” and the subsequent fear of their inevitable derangement echoes panicked media responses to dime novels (see Chapter One). Major newspapers ran stories like these regularly, describing how blood and thunder fiction seduced children to leave good homes and go west, to play dangerous games—occasionally maiming or even killing a playmate unintentionally—and to form gangs that wreaked havoc on orderly neighborhoods and even ventured into criminal behavior. Cody, of course, was no stranger to the dime novel, which did much to make his name. In fact, Buffalo Bill was featured in more blood and thunder titles than any single figure outside of Jesse James and even penned a few of the novels himself.

The story above, though, attaches itself not just to the iconic figure of Buffalo Bill, but to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, a traveling spectacle as ubiquitous as these newspaper cautionary tales, at one point logging 9,000 miles to perform 131 shows in 190 days (Russell, 379). Buffalo Bill’s Wild West extended its reach to Canada and, by

1887, across the Atlantic, where its allure to precocious youth proved so powerful that British authorities established a “special staff of detectives” to stand guard at the Liverpool docks to “look out for runaway youth and restore them to their parents” (Columbus Enquirer). At the same time, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West generated starkly different responses, as evidenced by this provocatively titled 1893 news-item, “Cured of Indian Fever: A Father Presents his Son’s Outfit to Buffalo Bill”:

Col. Wm. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) had a strange visitor in his camp the other night. It was a middle-aged man with a fatherly look, who carried with him a strange assortment of rude wooden daggers, long pieces of rope and rusty pistols. He also had a valise full of old cartridges, one or two red feathers, and a leather belt. “You may have these,” he said as he pushed them over to the Colonel. “My son has no further use for them. The Wild West has killed all his desire to eat the flesh of the red man and become another terror of the plains.”

The article goes on to explain how the boy had suffered for years from “cowboy fever,” before finally being cured by attending repeated performances of the show, which demonstrated “the actual life of the far West,” so that “the glamor has been rubbed off for him.”

These two articles hint at the complex relationship between Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and nineteenth century notions of boyhood, a relationship scarcely explored in scholarship to date. In the *Philadelphia Inquirer* article, the show plays the part of the seducer, enticing good boys to leave comfortable homes and risk their lives in the unsettled west. In the second article, it plays a different role, alleviating a young boy of his romantic notions of the West and demonstrating the “actual life” of the place. These seeming contradictions are not coincidental. In the ten years between the two news stories, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West underwent significant changes as Cody and his partners

struggled to manage the conflicting impulses at the heart of his show. This process gestures to the fluid relationship between the frontier and boyhood in American popular culture, articulating broader negotiations about race, gender, and power in the late nineteenth century. In 1889, Theodore Roosevelt christened westward migration “The Winning of the West,” a frontier narrative in which, as Gail Bederman suggests, “ideologies of manliness were thus similar to—and frequently linked with—ideologies of civilization” (27).¹ Buffalo Bill’s Wild West demonstrates that narratives of civilizing the West were linked just as closely to constructions of boyhood. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the frontier and boyhood interacted vigorously with one another to inform millennial discourses of American nationalism, projecting powerful visions of the young nation’s past and future.

Of course, as Louis Warren describes it, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West “was a mass entertainment” that catered to no overt political agenda. Cody and his partners managed to draw “millions of Americans to its bleachers over so long a career, and to achieve consistently glowing reviews from critics and newspapers on different sides of so many political questions” (264). Reaching across partisan lines, the show’s main appeal was in a collective fervor for the past, a shared dream of American conquest and prosperity, much as Frederick Jackson Turner would channel in his 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Much like Turner, Cody and company fostered anxieties about the conquest of the West into a powerful celebration of white masculine vitality. In addition, Cody used frontier narrative to imagine the West as a space of and for boyhood. Adopting the roles of educator, boy worker and father figure, Cody spoke

directly to American boys, developing and disseminating an influential brand of frontier mythology deeply connected to constructions of American boyhood.

Geared toward an audience of children, Buffalo Bill's Wild West fed off paradoxical impulses about both the imagined frontier and the American boy. On one hand, the show promised fantasy and escape, as staged re-enactments of frontier life interacted neatly with children's play: after all, what else was Cody doing as Buffalo Bill but "playing Cowboys and Indians," a play script he did much to inform (if not create outright)?² At the same time, the show marketed itself as more than mere performance. Cody billed Buffalo Bill's Wild West as living history, an opportunity to see the frontier "as it was," precisely at the moment when, as Turner's speech suggests, western migration had reached its terminus, and there was no frontier left to see.

The show, and the iconic figure of Cody himself, was built on the idea that frontier life developed American boys into the right kind of American men. At the same time, it suggested that this frontier life was unattainable, that the best—and in some cases only—way to experience it was through re-enactment. In this way Buffalo Bill's Wild West offered a conflation of human development and theatrical performance imagining the frontier as a space of perpetual boyhood. Annette Kolodny argues that Turner's frontier thesis reveals "the experiential truth of the American continent: the West was a woman, and to it belonged the hope of rebirth and regeneration" (136). In Cody's west, this theme of continual rebirth is persistently vivid, preserved and inscribed through the performance of history. This history cast the West as a mythic space forever young, forever growing, a space where the virgin land births and nurtures robust specimens of

American boyhood, a space that forms these specimens, much like Cody himself, into powerful visions of American masculinity.

With the growing awareness that the frontier was “closed,” this kind of performance took on increasing importance in the 1880s and 90s. For the generations of boys who couldn’t experience the frontier as Cody had, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West served as a vital conduit. Re-enforcing the bond between boyhood and the frontier, it played a crucial role in defining American identity in the late nineteenth century. Encountering the show, American boys could be both entertained and educated. Cody and his partners don’t appear to have formulated any single strategy in cultivating child spectators or in establishing connections between the show and the development of American boyhood. Still, cultural notions of boyhood and a flesh and blood audience of boys were critical to the creation and refinement of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and, in fact, Cody’s entire career as an entertainer.

1. Mass Culture’s New Frontiers

Cody did not invent this brand of frontier; in fact, many aspects of his show seized on emergent trends in popular culture. The size and scope of the traveling show shared much with the circuses popularized by P.T. Barnum, James Bailey and others, while exhibitions of “roping, steer-riding, and bronco-busting” had been organized as early as the 1860s (Asbhy, 80). Barnum himself had taken a couple of stabs at frontier spectacle—most notably his failed 1843 Buffalo hunt in Hoboken, New Jersey. Fascination with Native Americans was also a long-standing American preoccupation. George Catlin had toured the eastern seaboard—and across the Atlantic—in the 1840s, featuring Ojibway performers, his own paintings and re-enactments of Native American

life.³ Cody partnered with sharpshooter (and former dentist) Doc Carver to launch his first Wild West show in 1883, struggling from the start. The show was expensive to mount and keep on the road, and a run of poor attendance could be devastating. Even Cody's successes came back to haunt him, as he soon faced competition from a legion of imitators. After splitting with Cody, Carver mounted his own traveling show, and circus owners like Bailey and Adam Forepaugh soon got in the game. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Wild West shows proliferated so quickly that Thomas Altherr claims there "may have been as many as eighty companies touring in the decades at the turn of the century" (81).

Yet, despite a crowded field and constant competition, Cody's show succeeded where others failed. In large part, this stemmed from Cody's ability to balance the lure of sensational and the promise of the respectable to powerful effect, making a particularly strong impression on his legions of young fans. He boasted a natural magnetism and striking appearance that, as numerous reviewers attested, left audience members of all types enthralled. Amy Leslie, writing about Buffalo Bill's Wild West at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, describes how this appearance changed over the years. She notes that in "his earlier days a hint of the border desperado lurked in his blazing eyes and the poetic fierceness of his mien and coloring." By 1893, fierceness had been "subdued into pleasantness, and he is the kindest, most benign man, as simple as a village priest and learned as a savant of Chartreuse" (At the Fair).

As Leslie discerns, Cody's appeal went beyond good looks; as Buffalo Bill, he could channel both the "desperado" and the "village priest," delivering the titillating thrills of blood and thunder westerns with a safe veneer of gentility. Sandra Sagala points

out that even in dime novels, Cody was “often regarded as ‘a knight of chivalry’ or the ‘prince of reins.’” (79). Above all, Cody presented a powerful image of distinct American masculinity. Edward Aveling marveled that Cody “is so manly a man,” a representative of a “fine race,” and, importantly, “a type of a race vanishing as the Red Indian, its foe, vanishes”(150). Much like James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Cody is a symbol of ideal American masculinity and a member of a dying race. Unlike the fictional Bumppo, Cody could preserve this tension indefinitely, performing the vanished past through live performance on a nightly basis.

Of course, Cody did not fail to age. Performing from his late twenties on into his seventies, he transformed from young scout to elder statesmen in the public view. His public aged as well, with the boys who saw Buffalo Bill on stage in the 1870s growing into men and, perhaps, in later years, taking their own sons to see Buffalo Bill in action. In this way, the character of Buffalo Bill, and the space of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West worked to subordinate age categories to the nostalgic gaze. In her analysis of age-bound identities and summer camps, Leslie Paris describes the American summer camp as both fixed and fleeting. Every few years, Paris argues, “a completely new cohort of girls cycled through the camp,” while “older adolescents aged out of the group and into young adulthood” (107). As a day-to-day space then, the camp was a place where age-bound identities were constantly in flux. As a cultural construct, the camp was a timeless space, where campers of all ages viewed camping and childhood in the gauzy light of nostalgia.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West achieved a similar effect. Successive generations of boys filtered through the audience, but through the figure of Buffalo Bill, the show became a place where generational differences were de-

emphasized, where boyhood and the West were always in the past, always there, and always directing aspirations for the future. Previewing Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1897, one newspaper reporter muses it "does not seem very long to middle-aged men when they were boys and reading Ned Buntline's thrilling romances about Buffalo Bill." Getting to see Cody in person, those men both learned "Buffalo Bill was a real identity" and a vital link to those boyhood romances. As the reporter explains, while the pioneers who advanced American civilization "over the boundless reaches of far Western plains have nearly all passed the boundary of existence," Buffalo Bill remains. Regardless of age, he connects boys (and men) of all ages to the "boundless" frontier. That connection will be severed, and the article suggests, "when he is gone the life he portrays so realistically will become only traditionary" (Buffalo Bill is Coming).

Gaar Williams's cartoon, "The Last Exit," commemorating Cody's death in 1917 crystallizes this dynamic perfectly. Buffalo Bill appears from behind a translucent curtain, slightly parted. Behind the curtain, the viewer sees the sun setting over an unspoiled natural setting. Passing through the curtain, Buffalo Bill pulls the reins back on his horse, gesturing to an audience of four boys. The boys, also on the stage, ride toy horses (made up from broomsticks with varying degrees of sophistication). They stare up at Buffalo Bill as one salutes, one raises a wooden sword, and one raises a pennant that reads "FOUR GENERATIONS OF US." All white, with minor variations in dress, the boys draw attention to Cody's long tenure as performer, while also suggesting that generational differences are immaterial; on this stage, age and time are subsumed by the powerful frontier narrative of Buffalo Bill's Wild West (see Illustration One).

Both Cody's popularity and his efforts to manage it successfully reflect broader changes in American entertainment during the second half of the nineteenth century. Lawrence Levine uses Shakespeare to demonstrate the growing division between "high" and "low" culture during these years. Levine asserts that Shakespeare was "presented and recognized almost everywhere in the country" in the first half of the century, just as likely to be performed in a barroom as in a theatre (13-18). After the Civil War, however, he describes the gradual "sacralization of culture" in which Shakespearean performance became privatized as elite, highbrow culture. While theatre audiences in the first half of the century represented people from all classes, mingling together, the second half of the century was marked by "an increasing segregation" along class lines (57). As Cody transitioned his frontier spectacle from the stage to the outdoor arena, he and his partners were powerfully aware of that "increasing segregation." In fact, one of the triumphs of Buffalo Bill's Wild West was its ability to transcend the limits Levine describes.

The typical history of Buffalo Bill's Wild West traces the show's genesis to July 4th, 1882.⁴ Arriving home in North Platte for the Fourth of July festivities, the story goes, Cody was dismayed to learn how little had been planned to commemorate the holiday, and so he put together the "Old Glory Blowout," an outdoor celebration featuring a full parade, roping and racing contests, and other competitions and exhibitions that would later become staples of his Wild West. This concept grew naturally out of Cody's stage productions, which by this time, contained many of these elements, including sharpshooters, Indian performers, and live animals on the stage. In fact, by all indications, Cody had been imagining a large outdoor spectacle for some time, and as

Sandra Sagala concludes, the “transitions from combination to Wild West show was inevitable” (194).

That transition was easier to imagine than effect, however. As noted, Cody struggled in his initial run at staging a Wild West show, and from 1883-6, he kept his Combination on the road, partly to generate needed revenue (Sagala, 180). In 1884, after severing ties with Doc Carver, Cody teamed up with show business veteran Nate Salsbury, and they rechristened the show “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.” The naming is significant. Cody always emphasized that he wasn’t presenting a show but rather the “Wild West” itself, while Salsbury also perceived the venture as more than “merely a Wild West show” (Personal Note, Salsbury). Both men sought to differentiate their product not only from their direct competitors but, also, from “lower” forms of entertainment like the circus; for instance, Cody and Salsbury staunchly refused to include a sideshow for many years. While the two men had a tumultuous relationship, and in latter years quarreled about who was responsible for their great success,⁵ Buffalo Bill’s Wild West enjoyed its greatest success under the stewardship of Cody and Salsbury, and they continued working together up until Salsbury’s death in 1902.

2. Cultivating Buffalo Bill as a Boyhood Hero

From the start, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West profited from a significant child audience. Explaining his own early conception of the show, Salsbury makes it clear that Cody’s status as a dime novel hero would be the Wild West’s best form of promotion, noting that “wherever the Dime Novel had gone Cody had gone along for Ned Buntline had so firmly written Cody into the contemporary history of the Great Plains that he had made a hero on paper at first hand” (The Origin of Wild West Shows). Recognizing

Buffalo Bill as a fixture in the culture of childhood, Cody and company crafted a show appealing to an imagined child audience, one built around the persona of Buffalo Bill and the perceived dime novel appeal of that persona to American boys.

As Salsbury notes, Buffalo Bill first found fame in the pages of Ned Buntline's 1869 serial novel, *Buffalo Bill King of the BorderMen*. Three years later, Buntline had convinced Cody to play himself in frontier melodramas styled after his dime novel adventures. After some initial reluctance, Cody tried his hand at the stage and never left it. In an 1878 review of Cody's stage production, *The Knights of the Plains*, one critic professed that Cody is "really the only man on the stage who gives representations of himself," marveling that this unusual actor "is the only true type of the frontiersman, as we have been taught to regard him by writers of travel and adventure" (A Notable Man). Recognizing the authenticity of the frontiersman as simultaneously a work of fiction and a truth to be "taught," this critic offers a glimmer of insight into the distinctive mix that would later make Buffalo Bill's Wild West so successful.

Much like Buffalo Bill dime novels Cody's stage shows catered to a largely male audience. Another review of *Knights of the Plains* notes that, regardless of the play's quality, it is "highly relished by the self-reliant membership of the masculine sex"; furthermore, this type of theatre "does much towards inculcating freedom and independence in boys who seem to have a natural 'hankering' after this style of thing" (Grand Opera House). Such boys attended Cody's stage shows in great numbers, thronging in the gallery and christened the "gallery gods" by numerous reporters. One 1878 review of *May Cody* notes that "there was a great rush of boys on opening night" in

Baltimore, “fond of reading dime novels and Indian stories in boys’ periodicals, and worshipped Buffalo Bill as a great hero” (Fire-arms on the Stage).⁶

As he became more comfortable as a performer, Cody carefully constructed his image as a boyhood hero both on the stage and off. His 1879 autobiography, for instance, proved a skillful balance of dime store adventuring and authorial restraint. In comparison to the blood and thunder novels bearing his name, Cody, assuming he is in fact the text’s author,⁷ presents his life story, as Don Russell describes, in “a straightforward, unpretentious recital” (272). Of course, that recital boasted many improbable exploits, such as Cody’s heroic, and most likely fictionalized, service as a Pony Express rider and no shortage of Indian-killing, including the controversial scalping of “Yellow Hand,” immortalized by Cody as the “first scalp for Custer.” Rife with controversy and developed to its full potential as pure spectacle, no single incident highlights Cody’s careful performance of himself as Buffalo Bill better than Cody’s run-in with Yellow Hand.⁸

By 1876, Cody had made a habit of dividing his years between scouting and the stage, a combination with more than financial advantages. By spending his summers out on the plains, Cody bolstered his authenticity as a genuine Indian scout. In fact, on more than one occasion, Indian “hostilities” prompted rumors that Cody was planning to head out to the front immediately, rumors quickly followed up on by reporters and worked into news items that acted as publicity for Cody’s stage show. Of course, the Indian Wars were quite real, and Cody did scout for the army, which made his enthusiastic blending of fact and fiction even more potent. Well aware of this formula, Cody sought to exploit it at every turn, as he did in the confrontation with Yellow Hand.

The 1874 discovery of gold in the Black Hills, and the subsequent violation of the treaty ceding that land to the Sioux, provoked an escalation in armed hostilities in the summer of 1876, leading to the shocking defeat of General Custer and his men at Little Bighorn. Cody was on the plains. Having been sought out by General Carr and appointed as an army scout, he rode with the Fifth Cavalry when word reached them of Custer's defeat. Some 150 miles to the south of the Little Bighorn, the Fifth Cavalry encountered a small group of Cheyenne at Warbonnet Creek. As a military exercise, the encounter between General Carr's regiment and the Cheyenne was largely insignificant. It did, however, result in at least one Cheyenne casualty, a warrior killed by Cody. In the capable hands of the showman-account, the death of that warrior became an iconic symbol for America's "Winning of the West" and a prime example of how Buffalo Bill "made" history.

The details of what actually happened at Warbonnet Creek remain murky, but the truth of the encounter had less of an impact than the fiction. Cody was prepared that day not just to fight but to perform, decked out, as Louis Warren describes it, "in a stage costume of black velvet slashed with scarlet and trimmed with silver buttons" (118). In a brief skirmish, Cody shot and scalped a Cheyenne warrior. The remaining Cheyenne soon fled, and the Fifth Cavalry went on to Fort Laramie, where Cody promptly set about publicizing the skirmish. Enlisting the services of Army Lieutenant—and future frontier novelist—Charles King and a correspondent from the *New York Herald*, Cody shaped the killing of Yellow Hand into a powerful narrative of American frontier heroism: Buffalo Bill had taken the "first scalp for Custer." Even the name of the slain warrior was a distortion, having been mistranslated as Yellow Hand instead of Yellow Hair, suggesting

the dead warrior to be in possession of a “cowardly hand.” Cody discerned that accuracy was beside the point. As Joy Kasson argues, “the significance of the killing of Yellow Hair lies not in what ‘actually’ happened but in the uses that Cody made of it” (136).

Those uses were extensive. By the fall of that year, Cody’s combination was performing *The Red Right Hand or First Scalp for Custer* on stage. Night after night, Cody re-enacted the killing of Yellow Hand, lifting the scalp above his head and shouting, “the first scalp for Custer!” The scalp itself traveled with Cody and was often on display in the lobby. Drawn by True Williams, the image of Cody raising the scalp and ornamented headdress soon became an iconic one. It appeared in Cody’s 1879 autobiography, where Cody is shown dressed in the same buckskin he wore for publicity photos, with a knife in one hand and Yellow Hand’s scalp raised high in the other, as the Cheyenne appear, a distant blur, riding across the prairie toward the scene of their fallen warrior (see Illustration Two). Years later, a similar image would appear in Wild West programs, with Cody wearing not fringed buckskin but rather a dark shirt much like the black velvet costume Warren describes, standing on a high ridge overlooking the scene, further isolating him and Yellow Hand in the center of the frame. The composition emphasizes Cody and his vanquished foe, while the soldiers look up, awestruck, from below. If the context of the image changed, the message remained the same. Cody had claimed the first scalp for Custer, solidifying his reputation as Indian killer and national hero (See Illustration Three).

In targeting young fans, Cody had to present such exploits carefully. By mimicking dime novel theatrics too closely, he left himself open to the same attacks that sensational literature endured, including charges of corrupting the minds of

impressionable young boys. Indeed, reviewers of the Buffalo Bill's Combination occasionally found Cody's show stage show too grisly, likely to attract the "wrong" crowd and drive away the right one. An 1882 reviewer argues that Cody is "more attractive off from the stage than on it." While allowing that Buffalo Bill is a "genuine scout, whose achievements are well spoken of in Nebraska," and noting that the performers "present a good enough play of its kind," the reviewer worries about the impact of the show on its young audience. "It is to be feared that an increased demand for dime novels follows the annual appearance of Buffalo Bill," the critic bemoans, "and that's the pity of it" (Springfield Republican). Cody actively sought publicity that countered such perceptions. For instance, an 1875 critic previewing the show put on by Buffalo Bill's Combination stresses that it "is said to free from blood and thunder dime novel scenes," and, rather "is of the romantic and emotional order, and is said to possess considerable merit" (Amusements).

From the early days of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Cody and his partners stressed the romantic appeal of Buffalo Bill. Building on Cody's reputation as both deadly Indian killer and chivalrous "knight of the plains," Buffalo Bill's Wild West emphasized American progress and white supremacy while trying to distinguish this narrative from the rehearsal of similar themes in sensational literature. Achieving this balance was particularly important when it came to the show's child audience. Young fans played a huge role in the success of Buffalo Bill right from the start, and early reactions to the show demonstrated a familiar mixture of wariness and awe in this regard. On the show's 1883 debut in Chicago, a reviewer notes that Buffalo Bill's Wild West, depicting "realistic events of the plains, with the aid of buffalo, elk, cowboys, and redskins was

seen for the first time in this city.” Despite poor weather, the reviewer concludes, “at least 5,000 people assembled to witness the exhibition, which is really worth going a good ways to see.” The same raucous crowd that filled the galleries for Cody’s Combination was reportedly on hand and “the newsboys and bootblacks formed a large and important element of it.” Much like critics of Cody’s stage show, the reviewer attributed Buffalo Bill’s appeal to these boys to “the yellow-covered novels and five-cent libraries through which they had waged in company with daring scouts,” joking that the boys’ “energy in selling papers and giving shins was redoubled” (*The Wild West*).

While the enthusiasm of newsboys and bootblacks for Buffalo Bill performances was nothing new, the format of Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* provided these boys with new ways to experience the show. Rather than be isolated in the gallery, boys were free to wander the grounds, a few “of them scraped an acquaintance with the Indian kidlets by carrying water for them,” facilitating admission to the “sacred circle of the Indian village” (*Chicago Tribune*). Cowboys and Indians alike camped out on the grounds while Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* was in town, offering unprecedented access to the performers in the show. In this way, and through the parade preceding the show, Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* offered myriad opportunities for lower class audience members to get close to Cody and his performers. Priced at 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for children, tickets were not cheap, and these free opportunities to experience Buffalo Bill’s world up close must have been invaluable to the newsboys and bootblacks the reviewer from the *Chicago Tribune* was so struck by.

Of course, this increased access only heightened the show’s potential danger to attract the wrong crowd. An 1885 *Chicago Tribune* review describes how Buffalo Bill’s

Wild West seemed to take over the entire city for an entire afternoon. “From noon till nearly 4 o’clock,” the reviewer notes, “there was matter for moralizing at every corner of the West Side. The ungodly were out in masse.” Swarming to the show, this “ungodly” mass “resolutely turned their backs on churches and every other mark of civilization to take up, and echo along the line the cry of westward ho!”(qtd in Deahl, 33).

Even defenders of the show acknowledged its perceived threat to social order. “One thing the management ought to make more prominent in their advertising,” an *Illinois State Journal* writer suggests in 1883, is that the Wild West “is in all respects a moral show. There is nothing that ladies and children may not see; indeed, it is an exhibition particularly interesting to them.” Admitting Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was perceived as “a rough show,” one reviewer stresses the show “is as decorous as a Sunday School, and far more interesting” (qtd. in Deahl, 13). Cody and his partners were not remiss in addressing—even anticipating—such criticism. Their 1884 program emphasizes the question of safety with the following guarantee: “I desire to remind the Heads of Families that ladies and children can attend my exhibition with Perfect Safety and Comfort, as arrangements will be made with that object in view” (22).

While Cody and his company presented their show as safe and wholesome, they struggled to shake the sense of danger associated with Buffalo Bill himself. In July of 1887, a boy was shot and “probably fatally injured” while at play. The brief story reports that the boys “were playing Buffalo Bill and discharging what they believed to be blank cartridges from a parlor rifle” (“Playing Buffalo Bill”). Similar incidents reported boys injured or killed at play, while other stories struck a more light-hearted note.⁹ Regardless of tone, the message was consistent; Buffalo Bill’s powerful magnetism had a

profound effect on boys, impacting the games they played alongside their perceptions of the imagined West and the world they lived in.

3. Negotiating Promise and Peril in the Wild West

Buffalo Bill's greatest danger lay in his perceived potential to seduce wayward boys to leave home and go west. This fear touched on a paradox central to the appeal of Cody and other scouts turned showmen; rough and tumble frontier childhoods were key components of their creation myths, but success as performers required them to dissuade young fans from following in their footsteps. Through most of the show's life, cautionary articles like the one introducing this chapter proliferated in newspapers, and in some cases boys did run away from home to seek out Buffalo Bill and the romantic life of the West. Take Gordon Lillie. Born in Indiana in 1860, Lillie read frontier dime novel stories voraciously as a youth. As a boy, he saw Buffalo Bill's Combination and, in Michael Wallis's words, "knew he would never be happy until he moved west" (267). Shortly after his family moved to Kansas, the 15 year old Lillie did just that, going to work for a trapper and later left town to live among the Pawnee. Adopting the name Pawnee Bill, he worked for Cody as an interpreter in 1883 and then launched his own successful career as a Wild West showman. In 1908 he partnered with Cody for "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East Combined."

Like Lillie, Cody's appeal to boys was strongly connected to his mythic status as a "child of the plains," a heroic figure shaped by his frontier upbringing. In Beadle & Adams's 1881 *Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood*, Prentiss Ingraham describes how when a young William was "but nine years of age his first thrilling adventure occurred, and it gave the boy a name for pluck and nerve that went with him to

Kansas” (3). Ingraham stresses that the West was, in fact, a dangerous place, so much so that Cody’s father “allowed his son to go armed,” and, in fact, Billy always hung up his pistol with his hat, a pistol he “prized (it) above his books and pony and always kept it in perfect order” (3). In fact, Billy’s gun proves far more useful than his school books in Ingraham’s telling. When outlaws come to steal his father’s horses, Cody shoots one dead, holding the three others at bay until help arrives. Afterwards, he was “voted the lion of the log cabin school, for had he not,” Ingraham asks, “killed his man?” (3).

Much of Ingraham’s book mimics Cody’s own autobiography, which emphasizes similar themes—if in a more restrained tone. At the age of seven, Cody recalls his first impression that the West was a dangerous place, describing a group of men who “appeared like a lot of cut-throat pirates who had come ashore for a lark (33). As Cody notes, this inhospitable environment also shaped him into a man, and he attests that his “love of hunting and scouting, and life on the plains, generally, was the result of my early surroundings” (34). In fact, Cody recounts running away from home himself. He’s offered a job herding cattle at the age of ten, but his mother withholds her consent. Cody reasons his “ideas and knowledge of the world” to be “in advance of my age,” and decides to take the job anyway, claiming the offer of “twenty-five dollars a month was a temptation which I could not resist” (55-6).

Cody wasn’t the only frontier showman negotiating this thorny paradox. Former partners of Cody’s, Doc Carver and Jack Crawford later teamed up to stage *Life on the Plains & Wild West Combination*. Their 1883 program introduces Doc Carver as a boy shaped into a manly frontier hero after running away from home. At the age of seven, “Dr. Carver bade good-bye to his log cabin home, and, without saying farewell, he stole

quietly away into the wilderness of Wisconsin, bent on living entirely by hunting and trapping.” The program boasts that Carver spent his youth “on the wild frontier, and this great outdoor freedom did very much towards developing his wonderful constitution and gigantic figure” (Introductory).

Carver’s partner in the show, Captain Jack Crawford later made a living performing as “the cowboy poet,” and he persistently warned his audience of the deadly threat posed by blood and thunder novels in leading boys to run away from home and into a life of ruin and debauchery. Crawford, who had the rare distinction, at least among the showman-scout community, of abstaining from drink, often conflated dime novels and alcohol as a powerful formula for eroding the virtues of youth. In one colorful lecture, “How I Met Billy the Kidd,” Crawford describes an improbable run-in with the famed boy-outlaw. Billy confesses:

I’m awful, awful bad, but if I’d never been an outlaw...I want you to do me a favor. When I’m gone tell the boys...Tell ‘em Cigarettes was my starter, then hard cider, then a little wine given to me by a girl and then bad books (dime novels) and then whiskey. Tell the boys and tell ‘em I asked you to afore they killed me. (qtd. In Nolan,102)

In this inventory of boyhood temptations, bad books come after wine (and girls) and just before whiskey, suggesting that fears of frontier dime novels conveyed hysteria and not just hyperbole. Crawford also relied on his own wayward youth as an example. While performing one of his plays, *Colonel Bob*, he addressed the boys in the audience: “When I was a little boy like some of you, I read a lot about Deadwood Dick...So one day I ran away from the Newsboy’s home and worked my way out to the plains, where I came near goin’ to the dogs. I wanted to be a bad man” (Qtd, in Nolan, 102). Of course, this desire to be a bad man was as essential to Crawford’s appeal as his cautionary tales

about the frontier, and the cowboy poet surely knew as much; despite his frequent condemnation of dime novels, Crawford starred in a number of them—including *The Adventurous Life of Captain Jack*, published by Beadle & Adams, who also published the Deadwood Dick novels. Like Cody, Carver, and others, Crawford used sensational fiction to simultaneously provide his credentials as a true western hero and to distinguish himself as a responsible role model.

This process suggests how constructions of boyhood and American ideas about the frontier were deeply intertwined. To some degree, the paradox Cody and his peers confronted was irresolvable. On another level, there was no need to resolve it. The paradox worked to establish the frontier as a space of timeless boyhood, where young boys are shaped into sturdy men and the nation itself is continuously revitalized, a space of development and progress. Imagining the frontier this way entailed more than elevating the figure of the scout or creating a rarified masculine space. The American frontier featured in Buffalo Bill's Wild West worked as a space of regenerative transition, the nation always getting younger, always growing stronger.

At the same time, Cody's boyhood exploits were surely an allure to the boys in his audience. In this regard, the trick was to extoll his youthful adventures, rather than deny them, while managing to placate parents and other adult caretakers. The battle with Yellow Hand may have been gory, but Cody didn't hesitate to pitch this piece of his personalized history directly to younger fans. In doing so, he framed the encounter as both dime store bloodletting and a crucial step in America's conquest of the West. The "first scalp" was included prominently in Cody's autobiography and in Ingraham's *Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood*. In 1899, Cody wrote up another

version, entitled “My Duel With Yellow Hand, for *Harper’s Round Table*, a monthly publication, targeting young readers, notably boys. Draping this murderous act with patriotic urgency, Cody effectively tempered its sensationalized violence for diverse audiences. In its early years, from 1883-1886, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West followed a similar tack, framing themes of frontier conquest with overt nationalism, evidenced by the show’s brightly colored program covers, while trying to balance those themes with Cody’s value as an educator.

The 1883 show featured a full color program, awash in red, white, and blue, with Cody and Carver on the cover, an American flag behind them and “U.S. Scouts” emblazoned on a star spangled badge beneath a Buffalo Head in the center of the frame (See Illustration 4). The back cover makes the theme of Indian warfare more explicit through a vivid representation of Indians and Settlers in combat. An advertisement for the show promises “A True Picture of Life on the Frontier,” advertising “Indian Dances and Races, Fancy Shooting, Indian Sham Battles, The Attack of the Stage Coach, Riding Bucking Horses, Indian Camp Scenes” and other western attractions, including “cowboy fun” (We Are Coming). The work of civilization is the focus, emphasizing the pioneers who settled the frontier and the Indians who stood in their way. Buffalo Bill is presented as a by-product of this work and the frontier, which “created an atmosphere of adventure well calculated to educate one of his natural temperament to a familiarity with danger and self-reliance.” Gleefully promising both “real” western life and “sham” Indian warfare, the advertisement testifies to American progress, promising the show will be “novel, instructing, and entertaining” (We Are Coming).

The 1884 program presented similar themes with a clearer structure. Salsbury and Cody crafted a sequence beginning with the Grand Parade and ending with the “Attack on Settler’s Cabin by Indians and Rescue by Buffalo Bill with his Scouts, Cowboys, and Mexicans.” This basic structure remained intact until 1892; while various acts shuffled in and out of the lineup, emphasis on the progress of white civilization remained. That emphasis is reflected in the visual iconography of the programs and the massive posters Cody and Salsbury’s advance team plastered, as Jack Rennert describes it, “within a 200 mile radius of the city to which the Wild West was coming” (5).

On the 1884 cover, Cody is presented in full buckskin, rifle in hand as he pulls back on the reins of his horse Buffalo Bill and his mount dominate the frame on a grassy hill, while beneath him, on the plains, a long line of covered wagons ride into the distant horizon. He appears as scout and protector, watching over the settlers as they make their way west. The cover for the 1885 program shows no settlers, presenting Cody as a showman in colorful red and yellow chaps, racing his horse from right to left as he twirls a lasso overhead, revealing an image within an image (See Illustration 5). The picture of Cody appears to have been set down in the middle of the forest, with grass peeking out beneath and the branches of a tree hanging out in front of the image. Crouched by this tree, a much smaller trio of Indians, one armed with a rifle, peek warily out at the imposing figure of Cody, as it threatens to squeeze them out of the frame altogether. The complex visual arrangement brings the two sides of Cody together. A dominant visual icon of frontier performance, he still strikes fear and awe into the war-minded Indian.

These images comment on critical discourses about race and nationality in 1880s America. In the early days of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, the frontier was still being

contested, both as physical space and theoretical construct. General Custer's defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn was only four years old, and American victory in the Indian Wars seemed inevitable but not yet assured. The 1890 census would declare the western frontier closed, a point critical to Turner's 1893 frontier thesis. In the 1880s, these ideas were present but less certain, and the evolutionary logic undergirding Turner's summary of the essential American character was still being teased out.¹⁰ As Jonathan Martin describes it, throughout the 1880s, Buffalo Bill's Wild West "romanticized a frontier past that had pitted civilization and savagery under their respective racial standards of white and red," while presenting "that racialized past as the keys to surviving a tumultuous, though still progressive present" (96).

In the 1885 program, all of these themes are at work. Equal parts frontier hero and showman, Buffalo Bill dominates the space of the frontier, a space that exists as a projection of imagined America. In that projection, the romantic vision of the white masculine scout literally replaces the primitive Indian other, who, relegated to the past, still lurks to threaten the full realization of an idealized white civilization. A comparison of the two programs suggests that Cody and Salsbury highlighted these themes deliberating, updating the show from "prairie exhibition" to Wild West reality. The same themes dominated programs for Buffalo Bill's Wild West throughout the 1880s. Those programs grew fatter over these years as well, with increasingly detailed descriptions and endorsements of the show's narrative of frontier conquest.

4. Buffalo Bill as Educator

From the very beginning of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, this narrative of conquest was inflected through the rhetoric of education. Starting in 1884, the programs contained

a “Salutatory,” attributed to John Burke, stressing the educational value of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Claiming the true story of the West “has never been half told; and romance itself fall short of the reality when it attempts to depict the career of the little vanguard of pioneers, trappers, and scouts, who always in the front have always paved the way.”

Celebrating the role of these scouts as civilizers, Burke stresses that “east of the Mississippi, the methods of these people are comparatively unknown, and it is for the purpose of educating them that this little pamphlet has been prepared” (4). By 1885, the program extolled Buffalo Bill’s Wild West for its educational value more directly. A new description of Cody appeared under the sub-heading “As an Educator,” with journalist Brick Pomeroy writing, “I wish there were more progressive educators like Wm. Cody in this world.” (9).

In the next few years, the programs increasingly touted Cody as an educator. By 1887, the “As An Educator” section had grown to half a page in length. Pomeroy describes Cody as “a sturdy, generous, positive character,” a “gentleman” who “as a lover of his country, wishes to present as many facts as possible to the public, so that those who will, can see actual pictures of life in the West, brought to the East for the inspection and education of the public.” Cody seeks not merely to profit from his distinctive brand of entertainment, but “to give people in the East a correct representation of life on the plains, and the incidental life of the hardy brave, intelligent pioneers,” men who secured the open West as a space where white American civilization could prosper. Descriptions of “Sham Battles” are no more, as Pomeroy suggests the show should be called “the Wild West Reality” (1887, page 11).

This focus on Cody as an educator worked to simultaneously soften and to promote Cody's reputation as an Indian Scout. In this way, popular features of the show, such as the typical finale "The Attack on the Settlers' Cabin," offered multiple messages to its audience. Leading a troupe of cowboys, Cody plays the dime novel hero to the hilt in this staged mini-drama, gunning down "Marauding Indians" as they attack a helpless family of white settlers. As the stalwart scout paving the way for civilization, Buffalo Bill presents his audience with a glimpse at the "facts" of western expansion—both the fragility of frontier domesticity and the sure victory of that domesticity over savage incursion. Simultaneously, he's pitched as a teacher, bringing the ignorant easterner realistic depictions of the west as a kind of public service. In the early 1880s, Cody and his partners mostly staged Buffalo Bill's Wild West for eastern audiences, suggesting the show posited all easterners, regardless of age, as children in need of instruction.¹¹

Buffalo Bill's Wild West also reinforced the West as space of youth, where boys grew into the kind of rugged masculinity embodied by Buffalo Bill. The 1885 program's illustration of the "Attack of the Settler's Cabin" shows Cody and his mates arriving to rescue a white family from savage incursion (See Illustration 6). As the Indians swarm the settler's small wooden cabin, seeming to emerge from the forest itself blurred in the background of the image, Buffalo Bill and his mates swoop in, guns blazing and lassos twirling. The settler family is armed as well, with a woman firing a rifle out an open window and a man standing guard at the front door. Prominently featured, a boy stands in the grass in front of the cabin. Meeting Cody and his advancing force, he fires his rifle at an unseen attacker. In an inset image at bottom left, Cody is isolated with this boy, seemingly in the aftermath of the successfully repelled attack. Holding the rifle

confidently over his shoulder with one hand, the boy greets Buffalo Bill with his other. The image highlights the two as conquering heroes, suggesting a passing of the torch, as Buffalo Bill helps develop the child from frontier boyhood into the next generation of indomitable American manhood.

Continued emphasis on education helped Cody and his partners redefine Buffalo Bill's relationship to his child audience, casting him as a protector not only of the vulnerable child on the frontier but, also, the ignorant child who's grown up without experiencing it. Newspapers picked up on these themes eagerly. A typical 1886 review of Buffalo Bill's Wild West notes that nearly "1,000 school children on Staten Island visited the Wild West Exhibition of Buffalo Bill one afternoon last week." The happy children "cheered, clapped their hands till the sound of their voices overpowered the band and the firing by the cowboys and Indians." The reporter concludes that the entertainment provided by the show was matched by its educational value, concluding: "Every school in the country ought to witness the exhibition, and learn what is meant by Out West" (Pomeroy's Democrat).

At the end of the 1885-6 touring season, Cody and his partners broke from their established pattern of putting the show in storage for the winter. Renting out Madison Square Garden, Cody and Salsbury prepared to move their show indoors and stage, as Jonathan Martin calls it, a "more coherent narrative" of white American progress, one that separated the history of frontier settlement in distinct epochs, each of which "constituted an act in the performance and supposedly exemplified a distinct period of American history" (102). Subtitled *The Drama of Civilization*, the show was an explicit

and extended meditation on westward settlement, operating on the principle that such settlement was now complete.

Dramatist Steele Mackaye was hired to shape the narrative for *The Drama of Civilization*, and he set out to “illustrate all the obstacles to the white man’s advance that exist in the wilderness” (Letter to Nate Salsbury). The show’s four “epochs” were the Primeval Forest, The Prairie, the Cattle Ranch, and the Mining Camp; a reenactment of Custer’s Last Stand appeared as a late add-on. The show’s creators surrounded the live performers with impressive stagecraft, including massive painted backdrops—with each painting approximately 40 feet high and 150 feet long---wind machines, meticulous lighting, and a vast array of props. The show presented westward expansion as an unfettered celebration of white American progress, offering Buffalo Bill as the preeminent symbol of the nation’s triumphant ascendance.

Buffalo Bill scholar Louis Warren argues that this show’s “appeal lay in its projected amnesia about the nation’s most recent wounds” (264). In years of rapid change and increasingly political polarization, Warren sees an America less concerned, in 1886, with the Indian Wars than the dangers posed by waves of immigration and escalating labor unrest. He reads *The Drama of Civilization* as both a mythmaking exercise and an escapist fantasy, “a soothing and reassuring spectacle for audiences mostly united in their fear of anarchy and seditious foreigners” (267). If *The Drama of Civilization* made the Wild West’s narrative of white American supremacy more pervasive than previous productions had, it did little to sap the show’s appeal to the nation’s youth, with William Deal noting that large “groups of school children attended the matinees in order to witness the reconstructions of America’s past” (60).

On the heels of *the Drama of Civilization*, Buffalo Bill's Wild West headed off to England, a move that, in hindsight, seems almost inevitable. The frontier had been won, so foreign conquest was all that remained. After a triumphant return, and, later, a second, more expansive tour of continental Europe, Cody arrived at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. It would turn out to be a crowning moment for "America's National Entertainment," as the show was billing itself. Interviewed that summer, John Burke, Cody's close friend and publicist, reflected on the Wild West's appeal to foreign audiences. "They looked upon Colonel Cody apparently as a messenger of peace," Burke contends, claiming Buffalo Bill "brought American frontier history to their own doors and showed that the march of Western Empire meant the triumph of the plow over savagery and bullets." This "triumph" also demonstrates the rise of America, wherein "the lasso of the cowboy had conquered not only broncos, but their fierce Indian riders, who gladly exchanged the tomahawk for the arena of the Wild West" (Kate Field). Burke's rhetoric exposes a central tenet of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, namely that the idea of frontier was no longer confined to the space of the West. A more powerful symbol than ever, the frontier was an experience to be packaged and exported, re-enacted by Buffalo Bill and his company in a nightly affirmation of American triumph.

As before, shifting constructions of American boyhood were closely entwined with the show's reproduction of frontier mythology. Buffalo Bill became enshrined as a boyhood hero, and the show's dominant frontier narrative became increasingly pervasive in children's culture. In 1887, McLoughlin Brothers published *A Peep at Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, a children's picture book with the story told in rhyming verse. The book faithfully parroted the frontier themes emphasized by Cody and his partners. Buffalo Bill

is presented as a child of nature who dreamed of living “in the wild-wood free.” The bucolic paradise of the plains is threatened by “red men,” and the book celebrates Buffalo Bill and the white men, “brave and bold,” who subdued this threat, advancing the progress of white civilization (1). In describing “the game of hide-and-seek/The white and red men play/On the prairies wide, where on every side/They fight for the right of way,” the book sounds the familiar refrain of Cody’s frontier heroics, while laying out the template for children to re-enact those heroics through play (10). *A Peep At Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* frames Buffalo Bill not only as frontier hero but, importantly, as a role model for children, helping to counteract stories of runaway boys and children injured by enacting scenes from Cody’s show. This trend carried over into the 1890s as Buffalo Bill became a fixture in the culture of children’s play, with his name gracing toy guns, puzzles, action figure cut-outs, and more.¹²

As Buffalo Bill became lionized as a childhood hero, Cody and his partners altered Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in significant ways. From 1886 to the end of the century, the show underwent a number of key changes that corresponded both to new nationalistic ambitions and changing notions of American masculinity and boyhood. Two major changes to the show in these years were the expanded role and prominence of the cowboy and the addition—and expansion—of the Rough Riders of the World. While the influence of the latter is more immediately clear (one need look no further than Teddy Roosevelt’s pinching of the name “Rough Riders” as evidence of that), the former reveals an equally powerful reframing of American frontier narrative.

5. A New Era: Cowboys and Rough Riders

Entering the second half of the nineteenth century, cowboys were often considered to be wild and degenerate, a criminal class of men living on the fringes of society. During an 1881 address to Congress, president Chester Arthur himself described the troublesome presence of “armed desperadoes known as cowboys” in Arizona (Russell, 305). At the same time, the 1880s saw the cowboy’s reputation slowly improving. Already a consistent presence in dime novels, the cowboy attained hero status in *Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys*, 1882. Buck Taylor soon followed, with 1887’s *Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys*. Unlike Parson Jim, Taylor was a real person, and not coincidentally, he was a long-time employee of Buffalo Bill, having worked his way up from ranch-hand to Wild West attraction.

From his earliest days on the stage, Cody and his partners had worked hard to rehabilitate the cowboy’s image. Cody’s frequent co-star in the Buffalo Bill Combination, Texas Jack Omohundro, was particularly active in this regard, writing a glowing defense of the cowboy that found its way into the newspapers and later into programs for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West:

The Cow-Boy.—The cowboy! How often spoken of, how falsely imagined, how greatly despised (where not known,), how little understood! I’ve been there considerable. How sneeringly referred to, and how little appreciated although his title has been gained by possession of many of the noblest qualities that form the romantic hero of the poet, novelist, and historian: a plainsman and the scout.” (1884 Wild West program, 25)

A forceful correction to “false imaginings,” Omohundro’s rhetoric makes it clear that the cowboy has all the qualities of the frontier hero, standing as a direct descendant of the scout and, in fact, as symbol of future American prosperity: “as tall oaks from little

acorns grow, the cow-boys serves a purpose, and often develops into the most celebrated ranchman, guide, cattle-king, Indian-fighter, and dashing ranger” (25).

Of course, few cowboys would ever lay claim to the title of ranchman or cattle-king. Highlighting a clear, if often unrecognized social hierarchy in the very language of the frontier, scholar Jacqueline Moore argues no one “would call a cowboy a *cattleman* unless he owned the ranch,” (5) a right few of them ever enjoyed. Moore claims that cowboys were “essentially working-class men...subject to the same restraints that nineteenth-century workers faced across the country” (3). Indeed, Socialist advocate Edward Aveling, who traveled with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in 1886-7 and wrote with surprising admiration about the show, was quick to lump the cowboy in with other exploited American laborers, claiming “the “free” cowboy is as much that of a slave as that of his Eastern brother, the Massachusetts mill-hand” (155).

Their status as frontier laborers helps explain the cowboys’ bad reputation, especially in the eyes of wealthy western landowners and eastern elites. Coming five years after the Haymarket Riots in Chicago, where “anarchists” killed several policemen, Wyoming’s Johnson County War revealed similar class tensions, and Johnson County’s wealthiest ranchers worked hard to present their opposition as lawless rustlers.¹³ As noted in Chapter Two, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, 1902, cemented the cowboy’s status as an American icon of white middle-class masculinity, in clear opposition to the villainous half-breed Trampas, who as Jacqueline Moore describes him, “is more in tune with working class ideals” (210). Read in this light, Wister’s novel marks the exclamation of long-standing efforts to frame frontier masculinity as distinctly American, white, and upper class. As Gail Bederman argues, Roosevelt’s four volume *The Winning*

of the West held one central thesis: that “superior manhood had allowed the American race to prevail against the Indians, win a continent, and build a mighty nation,” such that “America’s nationhood itself was the product of both racial superiority and virile manhood” (195). To fit the cowboy into this narrative, this working class laborer had to be transformed into a chivalrous hero, a powerful aristocrat of the plains—much as Cody had transformed the scout.

This transformation can be traced through the increasing attention paid to cowboys in show programs. In the 1884 program, Buck Taylor was described as “a typical Westerner by ancestry, birth and heritage of associations as this noted herd.” His “eminence is based on the sterling qualities that rank him as “King of the Cowboys,” a title he inherited from his grandfather and Uncle, who died in the war with Mexico, and father who died as a member of the Texas cavalry. Unlike the Virginian—and Roosevelt, of course—Taylor was not a transplanted easterner. Nonetheless, he had all of the same qualities that would later be harnessed to frame Wister’s hero, and the cowboy himself, as an emblem of frontier heroism. If Aveling saw fit to compare cowboys to “slaves,” Cody and company seemed keen on promoting the Cowboy as the paragon of American supremacy and Anglo-Saxon superiority.¹⁴ A key part of this process involved distinguishing the cowboy from other articulations of frontier masculinity. 1884 programs described the “Attack on the Settler’s Cabin,” with subsequent “Rescue by Buffalo Bill With his Scouts, Cowboys, and Mexicans.” By 1887, any mention of Mexicans has disappeared, with the attack repulsed by “Cowboys, under the leadership of Buffalo Bill” (Wild West program, 2).

In the years that followed, Wild West programs didn't dismiss Mexican riders so much as make sure to distinguish them from cowboys. In the 1893 program, "The Vaquero Of the Southwest" is described in a separate section. "Between the 'cow-boy' and 'vaquero' there is only a slight line of demarcation." the program explains, before making the importance of that line clear; "The one is usually an American, inured from boyhood to excitement and hardships of his life, and the other represents in his blood, the stock of the Mexican, or it may be of the half-breed." Beyond the question of bad blood, it's clear clothes make the man, with the Vaquero described as "more of a dandy in the style and get-up of his attire than his careless and impetuous compeer." More frivolous than his Anglo-Saxon counterpart, the Vaquero is noted to be "fond of gaudy clothes, and when you see him riding into a frontier town, the first thought of an Eastern man is, that a circus has broken loose in the neighborhood" (Wild West Program, 27).

Buffalo Bill's Wild West worked out its narrative of frontier conquest through a complex relationship between the Indian Scout and the Cowboy. Both figures, after all, were symbols of white American masculinity and both were "made" by the frontier, "inured from boyhood" in the words of the programs, to all the promise and peril of the West. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, the cowboy's ascendance was clear, while the star of Buffalo Bill's Wild West remained Buffalo Bill, a buckskin-clad Indian Scout. Programs increasingly described the relationship between Cowboy and Scout as a passing of the torch. The 1902 bio for Johnnie Baker, who'd long performed with the show as "the Cowboy Kid" or "The Young Marksman" (but was by that point 33 years old) cloaks this transition in the language of growth and development.

Cradled amid such pioneer surroundings and dandled on the knees of the most celebrated frontiersman, the genuine old buckskin

trappers—the first frontier invaders—his childhood witnessed the declining glories of the buffalo hunter’s paradise (it being the heart of their domain), and the advent of his superior, the “long horn of Texas,” and his necessary companion, “the Cow-Boy.” (20)

Baker, who was more or less adopted by Cody at the age of seven, is described as a child of the Indian Scout, a product of the frontier “paradise” once patrolled by “old buckskin trappers.” By 1902, though, Baker’s future—like the nation’s future-- is aligned with the cowboys, those “brave, generous, self-sacrificing rough riders of the plains, literally living in the saddle, enduring exposure, hunger, risk of health and life.” Importantly, while the Indian Scout risked life and limb to cleanse the land of hostile Indians and pave the way for civilization, the cowboy serves “as a duty to the employer.” It’s this noble laborer who gave Baker his “first communion with society beyond the sod cabin threshold and impressed his mind as well as directed his aspirations, to an emulation of the manly qualities necessary to be ranked a true American Cow-boy” (Wild West Program, 20). The frontier mythos of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West has shifted, de-emphasizing the Indian Scout who lived on the fringes of society in favor of the disciplined and loyal Cowboy. In both cases, the frontier generates these ideals of white masculinity, forging—as in Baker’s case—formidable young manhood from the crude material of boyhood.

A second major shift in the show was more plainly evident; starting in 1893, Cody and Salsbury started billing the production as “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and the Congress of the Rough Riders of the World.” On some level, the change was practical. Unsure if Indian performers would be granted permission to tour with the show after the Wounded Knee massacre, Salsbury began securing the services of other attractions.

Russian Cossacks were billed in the 1892 programs, while Syrian and Arabian horsemen soon followed. At the same time, he and Cody were clearly expanding Buffalo Bill's Wild West to reflect global ambitions. Louis Warren suggests this move reflects a shrewd marketing response to the increasing number of immigrants in the audience. (421). On some level, the new name also reflects an acknowledgment of a new chapter in American frontier history.

The inclusion—and expansion—of the “Congress of Rough Riders” surely added diversity to Buffalo Bill's Wild West, though it also reflected the expansion of frontier narratives through American imperialist ambitions. In addition to Syrian and Arabian Horsemen, the 1893 program featured “Military Evolutions by a Company of the Sixth Cavalry of the United States” alongside regiments from the German, French, and British armies, while the 1894 show added a “Military Music Drill” (Wild West Program, 3). The emphasis on military themes—Cody by then had awarded himself the fully ceremonial title of “Colonel”—picked up in anticipation of the Spanish-American War, and, by 1902, included scenes from the war. Alongside a “U.S. Artillery Drill” “Life Saving Service Drill,” and a “Musical Ride, featuring “Veterans from the Sixth U.S. Cavalry,” the show featured “The Battle of San Juan Hill, “introducing detachments from Roosevelt's Rough Riders.” Now, in addition to the romance of civilizing the frontier, the program reveled in showing the “Resplendent Realism of Glorious War” (Wild West program, 24).

While the parameters of their frontier narrative shifted, Cody and his partners continued to emphasize the educational value of the show. By the 1890s, these efforts had successfully changed perceptions of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. An 1893 reviewer

from the *Daily Inter-Ocean* noted how the show had evolved. Acknowledging it as a “crude exhibition given back in the seventies,” the writer describes a transformation from “what have been termed at its conception a ‘catch-penny fake’ into one of the most interesting, innovated and instructive exhibitions of the world” (September). Buffalo Bill’s Wild West serves to “disabuse the public minds of any wrong impression that may have gone abroad through misrepresentation by historians or unreliable reporters.” Two reviews from *The New York Times* also attest to the transformation of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. An 1886 review describes a trip to the “pleasure grounds” of Cody’s Wild West, where the “more there was of banging pistols and scurrying Indians the better” (Indians at Erastina). By 1894, though, the paper lauds Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’s long stand in Brooklyn for “the presence of so many children,” who had a “universal desire among them to see this unique, original, and instructive exhibition” (Greatest Summer Show). Likewise an 1894 review in the *New York American and Mercury*, written during the show’s six month stay in Brooklyn claims it offers “a summer school of instruction to youth of our country who may be called upon at any time to come into contest with other countries.”

Cody and his partners also addressed their child spectators more directly. An 1898 *Bison Courier*, cut in the shape of a large Bison’s head (serving as the book’s cover) bears the heading “For the Children’s Eyes,” informing the reader:

Your parents will combine duty with pleasure by taking you to see it and when they do, they will say to Col. Cody, as did General Sherman, the hero of the March to the Sea: “*Billy, for my children and grandchildren, who can never see these things as we saw them, I thank you.*” And long and happily may you all live to profit by and pleasantly remember a day with that true, brave friend of every child, Buffalo Bill. (2)

The message to children is clear, noting that viewing Buffalo Bill's Wild West will surely dispel any myths about "the miseries, sacrifices and horrors of war." Educated by this experience, "sensible boys will not be misled by demoralizing blood-and-thunder stories," though, they'll remain "ever ready to defend 'Old Glory'—as did their ancestors in the Revolution, and their sires and grandsire in the sacred cause of the Union—whenever their beloved country calls upon them to defend her" (2). Young readers are encouraged to conflate westward expansion, and the conquest of Native American peoples, with the recent Spanish-American war, and by 1898, Cody and company had successfully woven the Indian Wars into a long story of America's "sacred cause," beginning with the revolution and, seemingly, to be continued with the expansion of American global imperialism. In the *Bison Courier*, the story of the West is the story of America, a narrative aimed both at children and their parents: "What the children see at Buffalo Bill's Wild West they will enjoy, appreciate, understand, and remember. What parents see there they will wish their children taught" (2).

6. Cody's New Role: Boy Worker and Father Figure

By 1893, Buffalo Bill's relationship with American boyhood had been re-oriented in the popular press. Reviewing Buffalo Bill's Wild West at the World's Fair in Chicago, one reporter speculates that should Buffalo Bill become the Governor of Nebraska, "it will take forty cars to pull the boys of Chicago who will want to go to Nebraska to see him inaugurated" (*The Daily Inter-Ocean*, December). The reviewer declares, "A man who makes friends of all the children as Buffalo Bill does have something good in him. His name sounds a little wild, but Buffalo Bill is a patriotic American." Over the years, Cody's reputation as the friend of all American children would only gain in strength,

while the notion that he had “something good in him” became more of a consensus among parents. In fact, Cody himself became seen as a surrogate father for the nation’s boys. When the organizers of the World’s Fair rejected an idea to grant 10,000 poor children free entry for a day, Cody stepped in, admitting 6,000 children to a free performance of the Wild West. The press celebrated his good will. “Waifs and Newsboys Have a Whole Day’s Sport,” declares one headline (Daily Inter-Ocean, July), while the boys themselves presented Buffalo Bill with a solid gold plate in the shape of a messenger card, acknowledging Cody’s great service to the “Chicago Waifs Mission Messenger,” and signed by the “Waifs of Chicago.” As popular inspirational author Orison Swett Marden aptly put it, in 1895, Cody was “the friend of everybody and especially of poor boys who have no chance in life” (Book Dedication).¹⁵

The closing years of the nineteenth century, and the first decades of the twentieth saw Cody grow into this role as father figure. While the allure of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West for the nation’s boys remained as powerful as ever, Cody was no longer seen as a threat but as friend and benefactor for the nation’s “poor boys.” In fact, as the friend of all American children, and a true patriot, Cody presented himself less as the hard-edged scout and Indian-killer and more as the affable ambassador of the frontier experience. Cody pitched this persona to American boys in a number of ways, most obviously through his show and its celebration of the American cowboy but also through his promotion of the frontier experience as a form of boy work.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, organizational boy work served to mold the character of the American boy, shaping the boys of eastern middle class families into robust visions of American manhood.¹⁶ For many boy experts, a

return to nature was a pivotal part of this process, presenting a potent antidote for the deleterious effects of modernist urbanity, with its implied threat of immigrant “masses” from the lower classes. The impetus to bring the boy back to nature spurred the growth of youth scouting and camping in America, and belief in the frontier as a space for shaping boys into men played a pivotal role in this movement. Before the Boys Scouts of America became entrenched in American middle-class culture, boy workers made extensive use of frontier rhetoric in their projects. Future Scout leaders Daniel Beard and Ernest Thompson Seton were particularly active in this regard. While British-born, Seton founded the Woodcraft Indians before becoming cofounder of the Boy Scouts of America. Beard, who later replaced Seton, initially founded the Sons of Daniel Boone. Both men used frontier mythology to construct idealized notions of white middle-class boyhood. Their organizations created frontier narratives, wherein, as Philip Deloria argues, “campers played the primitive authentic against modernity’s inauthenticity in order to devise a better modern” (102).

As Buffalo Bill, Cody drew on a similar set of tensions. At first glance, he appears to have more in common with Beard, who lionized the heroic figure of the American scout, but he knew both men. What’s more, Cody developed a very strong relationship with the Boy Scouts. He appeared in numerous scouting publications in the early decades of the twentieth century, and after his death in 1917, the Boy Scouts of America took up a collection to help fund his memorial. Beard himself acknowledged how critical Cody was to his thinking as he put together “the first society of boy scouts and tenderfeet” (Buffalo Bill). Recalling a conversation with the “President of the United States,” Beard recounts both men settling on Buffalo Bill as the “one man whom all the

boys love; one man who did more to open the Great West than any man alive to-day or dead yesterday” (Buffalo Bill). Later, in a letter to Cody descendent Mary Jester Allen, he describes Buffalo Bill as “a patriotic American, with a real love for the boys of America” (Letter). Former Wild West cowboy Harry Webb goes so far as to claim Cody “was instrumental in organizing the Boy Scouts of America” (27). There’s likely more than a bit of hyperbole to that claim. Still, Webb insists that Boy Scouts sent Buffalo Bill “thousands of letters,” and that Cody “personally answered every one,” and in its later years, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West frequently entertained entire troops of Scouts. On one occasion, in 1910, Webb recalls that Cody “guested two hundred Canadian Boy Scouts at his tables at one performance and voiced a glowing eulogy to the organization” (27).

If Cody played no formal role in developing the Boy Scouts of America, he had an active interest in organizational boy work. In fact, Cody anticipated the Boy Scouts of America by inaugurating the Cody Military College and International Academy of Rough Riders in 1901. Cody advertised the college in programs for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West; For \$250 for three months or \$550 for a year, the college offered “a tactical school for the teaching of horsemanship, marksmanship, cavalry and infantry drill, rough riding, scouting, camping, hunting, fishing, golf and physical perfection in out-door life.” The College’s literature does not single out boys, but rather young men, and Buffalo Bill scholars tend to dismiss the academy as a money making scheme. Certainly Cody was hard up for cash in these years and tried his hand at a number of schemes to help cover his mounting debts. At the same time, Cody frequently echoed the fears of boy workers such as Seton and Beard about an escalating turn of the century “boy problem,” something he became more vocal about in the final years of his life.

In 1909, Cody writes that American boys “are suffering from ‘ingrowing spunk.’ They have had so much done for them that the energy that they would naturally employ in overcoming external difficulties they have used internally in polishing up their self-esteem” (American Boys). As Cody indicates in other interviews, exposing boys to the great outdoors and providing them with a basic education in the rudiments of frontier manliness can alleviate these deficiencies of “spunk.” In a 1911 interview, he declares boys “should be taught to ride...because it is the most healthy physical exercise that they can have. The good rider brings every muscle into play; he learns while controlling the horse to control himself and he fill himself with fresh air.” All in all, he concludes, the “outdoor life lived by the boys is the thing that carries them into a profitable old ‘age.’” Reflecting on his own experience, Cody offers, “without my plains life I doubt if I could have got on as I have” (San Francisco Examiner).

Cody makes his message even clearer in a 1912 address to “The ‘Boy Scouts.’” He stresses that the purpose of scouting is to return boys to the kind of plains life that he once enjoyed, a life now unavailable in the settled west. With the civilizing of the frontier and the modernizing of the nation, Cody laments, “boys between the ages of ten and eighteen are often without healthful occupation.” The Boy Scout movement, Cody affirms, “is changing this condition,” and the method is simple. “When a boy learns by actual experience to love nature and become acquainted in an intimate with some of her wonders,” Cody notes, “he of necessity becomes a manly boy, who later develops into a very knight-errant of chivalry, self-reliant, unselfish, helpful, ever keen to aid and assist others” (The Boy Scouts).

These lines wouldn't be out of place in a program for Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and, in fact, Cody promoted a kind of boy work rooted in the same creative impulses that informed his career as a performer. Mixing romance and realism, Cody advocated a process transforming both the physical body of the boy and the narrative of his development. Through the frontier, real or imagined, performance created historical record and imagined future possibilities, using the pliable stuff of boyhood to frame a triumphant vision of American manhood.

In truth, as this chapter has outlined, this dynamic had long played an important part of Buffalo Bill's appeal as a showman. As one early reviewer of the 1879 play *The Knights of the Plains* asserts, boys shouldn't be shielded from frontier violence as it "is good for them, and they ought to indulge in it." In fact, the reviewer opines, the boy "who is taught to run whining to his parent when some companion inflicts an affront or injury upon him is not on a good road, and he should be switched off it" (Grand Opera House). Presaging child study pedagogues like G. Stanley Hall, this reviewer warns against discouraging boys from their natural proclivity toward violence and aggression. Anticipating Roosevelt and his philosophy of the "Strenuous Life," he recommends frontier experience as a counter-balance to the "sissification" of the American boy. As Bederman puts it, Hall sought "an antidote to the effeminizing qualities of modern civilization in the 'primitive,'" and Buffalo Bill suits Hall's pedagogy to a tee, positing the frontier as an ideal space for putting boys in touch with their inner primitive (78).

In his seminal study of American boyhood, Kenneth Kidd identifies two dominant discourses, boyology, which encompasses organizational boy work and rhetoric, and the feral tale, a host of literatures articulating boyhood through iterations of wildness.

Examining popular boyhood literatures of the nineteenth century, Kidd argues, “feral tales for boys preserve and promote the scientific and imaginative conceits of major political projects such as British colonialism, urban American “child saving” and Native American assimilation” (88). Cody’s use of the feral tale fits easily into Kidd’s list of nineteenth century projects. For Buffalo Bill, the space of the “Wild” West simultaneously draws out and gives shape to the inner wildness of the American boy, coded essentially as white. As such, the frontier, if not longer active as a physical place, remains crucial as a vehicle for developing these boys into the right kind of men, serving, in turn, as a vital incubator for white American progress.

By the time of his death in 1917, Cody had become an almost saintly figure, a silver-haired grandfather firmly established as the beloved hero to every American child. When he was buried, every grade school student in Denver was offered “a souvenir flower from the offerings” that made up the funeral pier, a souvenir fitting “to preserve the memory of Buffalo Bill in the minds of the thousands of school children who have made him their hero” (All Nation). Over the past fifty years, Cody had figured prominently as a hero to American boys and a symbol of the powerful connections between narratives of “civilizing” the frontier and American boyhood. Throughout these years, Cody presented the West as an ideal space for developing white American boys into strong, virile American men, and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West offered a popular form of entertainment linking the romance of the frontier with the story of white American civilization. Presenting history as performance and entertainment as education, Cody and his Wild West did more than promote the vision of the West as the story of American

progress: he framed that progress by representing the frontier as a space of and for boyhood.

Endnotes

¹ Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* was one of the earliest explorations of relationship between the space of the West and the construction of American nationality. He deals with the masculine frontier hero, including analysis of Buffalo Bill, in Book 2. Richard Slotkin covers Roosevelt's "Winning of the West" in Chapter One of *Gunfighter Nation*. Gail Bederman's argument is presented in full in her first chapter, and she discusses Roosevelt at length in Chapter 5. Monica Ricco also probes links between race, nationality, masculinity, and the frontier in Chapter 4 of *Nature's Noblemen*.

² Newspaper accounts of boys and girls playing Buffalo Bill proliferated with increasing frequency in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for instance "Domestic News: An Imitator of Buffalo Bill," in the *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 7, 1884, or "Playing Buffalo Bill," in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 11, 1887.

³ For More on Barnum and frontier spectacle, see Neil Harris, *Humbug*, 66. Paul Reddin offers in-depth analysis of Catlin's career and his significance as a progenitor to the late nineteenth century explosion of frontier spectacle in Chapters One and Two of *Wild West Shows*. Joy Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, 67-8 and 84-5, and L.G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians*, 14-19 also address Catlin's connection to Wild West shows.

⁴ For an overview of the show's creation and early history See Kasson, Chapter One, Reddin, Chapter Three and/or Louis Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, Chapter Nine.

⁵ Cody and Salsbury had a prosperous but contentious relationship. The Nate Salsbury collection at Yale's Beinecke Library contains many hostile letters from Salsbury to Cody. In addition, the collection has drafts of Salsbury's memoir, in which he muses that when the book was finished, when "I intend on dubbing it, Sixteen Years in Hell With Buffalo Bill." Despite personal differences, their working relationship served as a foundation for the show's most profitable years, from 1884-1902. By 1895, Cody and Salsbury began partnering with James Bailey. According to Warren, page 230, a sideshow was added to Buffalo Bill's Wild West at this time. The sideshow became a fixture of the show after Salsbury's death, and Cody was forced to forge new partnerships with Bailey and others.

⁶ In *Performing the American Frontier*, Roger Hall discusses the "explosion" of frontier drama between 1872-76, pages 49-87. He argues that Cody and actor Frank Mayo's Davey Crockett "defined the poles of sentiment and fierce action that influenced every succeeding border drama" (74). In Hall's analysis, Cody's violent, action-filled plays were pegged as the preferred fare for male, working-class audiences.

⁷ Warren notes of the autobiography, 7, "that the question of authorship endures." Still, he concludes that Cody did likely author text. In Chapter 20, Don Russell considers Cody's life as an author in detail, arguing vigorously that Cody not only wrote the autobiography but some of the Buffalo Bill dime novels

⁸ Like much of Buffalo Bill's history, the duel with Yellow Hand remains controversial, and has been since first reported. Over the years, various reports surfaced containing wildly different claims, ranging from a full endorsement of Cody's story to the claim that he didn't kill Yellow Hand at all. Warren offers a level assessment of the incident, 118-20, concluding that (if nothing else) Cody did kill Yellow Hand.

⁹ The newspaper stories of children playing vary in scope and tone. For a light-hearted account of boys at play, see "New Wild West Show: How Seventh Avenue Youngsters Imitate Buffalo Bill and His Tribes of Indians," in the *New Hampshire Recorder*, August 28, 1894. Even examples of children injured while playing Buffalo Bill varied in tone, with earlier accounts tending to be more anxious. For examples, see "Played Wild West," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, August 29, 1894, which worriedly recounts the story of a young woman shot by two boys playing Buffalo Bill and "Little George Rhoads Receives Gash in Head Which Removes Him From the Warpath," in the *Urbana Daily Courier*, August 7, 1909, which is surprisingly playful in its description of a boy falling on a hatchet.

¹⁰ Slotkin discusses Turner, and frontier mythology, through the rhetoric of development, 16-21. More recently, Karen Jones and John Willis, *The American West*, re-evaluate Turner's thesis through the lens of development, both in his time and ours, and its relationship to nineteenth century germ theory.

¹¹ Cody and Salsbury eventually toured all over the United States and traveled to many parts of Europe. In the latter years, especially after Salsbury died, Cody toured relentlessly, often on account of his declining financial situation. The Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave's website provides a comprehensive list of every place Cody went, titled, "Did Buffalo Bill Visit Your Town?"

¹² In *Buffalo Bill, a Collector's Guide*, James Wojtowicz includes a section on "Toys & Other Juvenile Delights," featuring a cast iron Buffalo Bill cap gun from the Ives, Blakeslee, and Williams Company, 1878, and a board game, 1898. There are many nineteenth century descriptions of Buffalo Bill toys in newspapers. For instance, see "Christmas Toys: Plenty of Them This Year For the Youth of Any Age," in the *Wheeling Sunday Register*, December 14, 1890, which recommends a set of Buffalo Bill action figures. *The Brooklyn Eagle*, December 16, 1894, contains an ad of Buffalo Bill "Box Sets" for sale. Also, see Dan Beard's New Ideas for Boys," in *The Ladies Home Journal*, November 19, 1899, wherein Beard guides reader in constructing their own Wild West cut-out figures. A surviving set of toy cut-outs exists in the Western Americana collection at Yale's Beinecke Library. The catalog describes them as "Wild West play figures, presumably cut out from a sheet or sheets. Included are seven Indian figures, six steers, five buffalos, and one cowboy."

¹³ Christine Bold, *The Frontier Club*, provides in-depth analysis of the Johnson County War as a symbol of frontier class-conflict, and its mediation through fiction, in her

Introduction. For more on class differences and frontier mythology in the late nineteenth century, see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, Chapter Five.

¹⁴ The “whiting” of the cowboy clearly contradicts historical record. See Jacqueline Moore *Cow boys and Cattle men*, for contentious race relations among nineteenth century cowboys, 134-40. Also, see John Ravage, *Black Pioneers*, Chapter 6, for a useful overview of black cowboys—and an intriguing set of accompanying images.

¹⁵ The connection between Cody and Marden, a popular artist of success-story books like *Pushing to the Front*, 1894, was more than co-incidental. In the late nineteenth century, Buffalo Bill became a fixture of literature advocating the rhetoric of the self-made man, especially pedagogical texts urging boys to work hard and live respectably. For instance, John Habberton’s *Poor Boy’s Chances*, published in 1900, featured a biography of Cody emphasizing how his commendable work ethic and sterling character earned him a place in the “full list of poor boys who have become successful men.”

¹⁶ In addition to Kenneth Kidd, see David Macleod, *Building Character*, Parts One and Two, for an overview of organizational boy work in the nineteenth century. See Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, Chapter Four, for a thorough examination of boy workers Daniel Beard and Earnest Thomas Seton and their use of frontier iconography.

Chapter Four: Wild West Children: The Frontier in Performance and Play

“The greatest thing Buffalo Bill ever did, a thing that few men throughout the ages have ever equaled was to give a new game to the children of the world.”

— Chauncey Thomas, May 1917

As we’ve seen, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was a type of performance that clearly anticipated an audience of children. In creating and refining the show, Cody and his partners drew, both implicitly and explicitly, on contemporaneous cultural notions of American boyhood. While drawing on Buffalo Bill’s appeal as a dime novel hero, Cody and his partners also promoted their Wild West as a vital educational tool. They presented Buffalo Bill as frontier icon, and, at the same time as boy worker and even father figure. In this way, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West spoke directly to an audience of American boys and to the parents, teachers, and moral guardians concerned about the welfare of those boys. Imagined through ideals of boyhood, the frontier created for the Wild West arena sought to both entertain and educate generations of American boys who would grow up without any “actual” frontier to experience.

This dense web of connections between American boyhood and popular frontier narratives becomes more complex when evaluating the many child performers in and around Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. In a variety of contexts, both formal and informal, child performers were a hallmark of the show, and their presence did much to inform and articulate the dynamic relationship between boyhood and the frontier, both in the show and in the broader American culture of the late nineteenth century. A thorough analysis of child performers in and around Buffalo Bill’s Wild West demonstrates how they were used to process and explore the frontier narratives generated by Cody and his partners. It also reveals how these young performers reacted and interacted with these narratives,

which worked as powerful engines for imagining America's past and future in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries.

The Wild West's promoters offered –more or less-a unified vision of frontier boyhood as a vehicle for building and sustaining American masculinity and national identity. By contrast, the various young performers in the show revealed the flexibility in this particular frontier narrative. Eric Lott argues that the significance of any popular cultural form lies in its resonance, its ability to tap into collective fantasy. The young performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West demonstrate that ability at work on several levels, revealing how the show was able to simultaneously reproduce visions of hegemonic masculinity and American imperialism and, as Lott puts it, “retain subversive dimensions, or for a time, be invested with them” (102). Blurring the line between performer and spectator, these children adapted the show's scripted mythology in various ways, creating vital spaces for complicating the Wild West's dominant frontier narrative.

A careful study of the child performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West reveals that the show was often successful in wedding figurations of American boyhood to dominant notions of masculinity. At the same time, while confronting constrictive narratives of race, class, and gender, child performers used frontier narratives for their own purposes, exerting a kind of agency they've been little credited for. We can see this process at work with the show's featured white child performers, the many Native Americans, or “Show Indians,” who traveled with the show—and were forced to negotiate the politics of performance from the moment they boarded a train to join Cody's crew to the moment they returned home to the reservation—and, finally, the young audience members who interacted with performers, both inside the arena and out.

1. Boys, Girls, and Guns

Johnny Baker served as the longest tenured “child performer” in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Often described as the “Cowboy Kid,” Baker was a fresh-faced, brown haired boy who was with Cody from the beginning of the show’s first run in 1883. Baker grew up in poverty in North Platte, Nebraska and met Cody when he was seven years old. He saw Buffalo Bill on stage in 1876, and recalls getting his “first glimpse of the famous frontiersman” noting that Cody quickly “became my idol and I soon was on friendly terms with him” (Personal Note). In fact, Cody was mourning the loss of his own young son, Kit, at the time. He warmed instantly to Baker and the bond between the two grew strong enough that Cody all but adopted the boy.¹ Baker traveled with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West as a child performer up to its final performance, later serving as one of the show’s business managers. After Cody died, Baker looked after his gravesite, running the small museum dedicated to Buffalo Bill on the top of Lookout Mountain in Colorado. When Baker died, he was buried next to Cody’s biological children.

Baker wasn’t just a member of Cody’s extended family, though; he was a steady and consistent presence in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. While Baker would play a number of roles in the show over the years—from off-stage manager to actor, donning a blond wig to assume the role of General Custer—he had originally been trained by Cody to do rifle tricks and was often celebrated as “the cowboy kid” or “the young marksman. Baker began performing publicly as a marksman at 14, was first advertised in the Wild West’s 1885 program, and became a fixture in the show’s prime years, the late 1880s and 90s, performing various rifle tricks, including his (perhaps) signature move of firing at targets, while standing on his head.

Throughout those prime years, and even on into adulthood, Wild West promotional literature stressed Baker's youthful vigor. In an 1895 pamphlet promoting the show, John Burke describes Baker, 26 at the time, as "a typical boy of **the type only produced in America.**" Baker, Burke notes, is in full possession of "that elasticity and conscious strength and self-reliance which marks **the young frontiersman** (Education and Amusement). Like Cody himself, Baker represented a distinctive type of masculine frontier hero, one who could only be produced by growing up with the country, and with the nation itself. Raised on the frontier, Baker also idealized traits of American boyhood. Possessing the "self-reliance" to succeed in the harshest of environments and the "conscious strength" to master the task at hand, he performed difficult feats of marksmanship far beyond the ability of most grown men. At the same time, the "elasticity" Burke references reminded audiences that Baker, like America, remained unbound, still growing and developing. This idea of elasticity was a central tenet of child development rhetoric in the second half of the nineteenth century. Child Study expert, and self-appointed guardian of boyhood, G. Stanley Hall touted the potential of adolescent flexibility, positing that for (white) boys, this liminal period offered almost limitless potential for developing idealized Anglo-Saxon masculinity. Like Baker, the frontier nation was a rising young stalwart brimming with promise and potential, ready to adapt to any new challenges.

It's no accident that Baker appeared in Buffalo Bill's Wild West doing rifle tricks. The show's most prominent young performers all performed with guns. Uniting the child, the rifle, and nature together was an essential narrative of American expansion and frontier conquest that transcended Cody's show and reflected longstanding

figurations of childhood. In 1894, a running column in *Shooting and Fishing Magazine, a Weekly journal of the Rifle, Gun, and Rod*, captured this narrative perfectly. The column was written from the perspective of “the Old Man,” who specified that his counsel was “For the Boys.” Much of the Old Man’s wisdom pertains to the finer points of hunting, including the importance of choosing and caring for one’s equipment. In his first column, though, the Old Man shares his own creation story with his youthful audience. “When the writer was a small boy, “ he notes, “long before he was large enough to carry a gun, he was in the habit of wandering, or running away, as we called it, to the woods and remaining there all day.” Indeed, the woods held a powerful but unconscious draw on him, so that when his mother asked for his whereabouts, “he of course could not explain or give any good reason for his conduct.” The boy could only offer that he “liked to see the squirrels and the birds.” Later, the boy came to understand this powerful attraction to these woodland creatures: “I was studying their nature, but did not realize it at the time.” It’s only “when I became older and was allowed to have a gun, I then made practical use of what I had learned of the nature and habits of the game I was hunting” (For the Boys).

The “Old Man’s” creation myth speaks both to notions of natural childhood that had grown increasingly pervasive in western culture² and the changing role of the gun in American culture. There’s been significant historical debate about the role of guns in America during the nineteenth century.³ One way or another, they were clearly a practical tool for many rural families, on the frontier or not, throughout the century. Just prior to the Civil War, gun advertising and manufacturing underwent significant changes that made mass-produced rifles more effective and affordable. In the second half of the

nineteenth century, gun manufacturers like Colt and Winchester competed in an increasingly crowded marketplace whose contours were being quickly and radically realigned. As the frontier “disappeared,” and populations were increasingly drawn to the country’s booming urban centers, guns became less relevant as practical household tools but, certainly, no less visible in American culture.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, guns were a fixture in the culture of childhood, and especially boyhood. In 1885, Winchester introduced a single shot .22 caliber rifle that was the first gun consciously made and marketed to younger shooters (Hauze, 7). The rifle’s release ties in with broader cultural efforts to preserve the gun as a resource for developing American masculinity. With less need for hunting, gun advocates placed a greater emphasis on marksmanship in the final decades of the nineteenth century. As Jay Mechling describes it, with the closing of the frontier and “the increased urbanization of American life, the power of the frontier myth and the power of sport hunting as the symbolic performance of masculinity, self-reliance and democracy increased” (7).

Indeed, Teddy Roosevelt founded the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887 to promote just this type of masculine performance, and, in 1903, he created the National Board for the Promotions of Rifle Practice. Many prominent youth leaders followed suit with initiatives targeting boys. By 1903, the NRA had founded its first youth programs, and, as Mechling points out, early Boy Scout of America leaders also advocated marksmanship “as a means to build strong, masculine citizenship in an increasingly uncertain era” (8). The failure of boy workers and other character-building organizations to take up this cause earlier speaks both to changing notions of the frontier and a more

sustained focus on urban youth. “Whatever the virtues of hunting for forging republican masculinity,” Mechling notes, “hunting was not to be the salvation of urban boys” (7).

Of course there was another way to market guns, to boys rural and urban alike, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Guns were imagined for children not only as a domestic tool or a resource for character building, but rather as objects of romance. They played a prominent role in the dime novel exploits of Buffalo Bill and others, a fact that did not go unnoticed by gun manufacturers. As early as 1873, William Cody used his status as a frontier hero for marketing rifles. In a “letter” to the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, Cody attests, “I have been using and have thoroughly tested your latest improved rifle, and for general hunting, or Indian fighting, I pronounce your improved Winchester the Boss” (letter to Winchester, qtd in Hauze, 96). This kind of product placement became commonplace during the Wild West’s heyday, with advertisements in the show’s programs boldly proclaiming that the show’s stars endorsed a certain brand of rifle. In this way, the romance of the gun was touted on several levels, all of which played on the role of the child in nature and the rhetoric of American progress. In that rhetoric, boy and land are read through and against each other, as the former takes strength from and dominion over the latter.

The instinctual bond between the boy and nature was an early step in his natural development into a consummate hunter, a development that continued whether there was anything to hunt (or anyplace to actually hunt it). In this rhetorical construction, the boy studies the wild to master it, whether that entails shooting “birds and squirrels” as the Old Man describes or killing Indians as Buffalo Bill dramatized on page, stage, and arena. The American boy raised, as Baker was, on the frontier becomes capable but not wild—

he gains the strength to master his inner-wildness, to turn his unconscious unity with nature into the “conscious strength” Burke touts in Baker. In this way, the masculine frontier hero is best developed in the laboratory of the frontier, where boys such as Baker become men like Cody. In performance of course, that trajectory is promoted but never achieved. As Cody’s long hair greyed, he grew comfortably into his celebrated role as the heroic father of all American boys. Baker, though, was posited as an ageless boy by the show’s promotional materials. Even as he headed into his thirties, the promoters of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’s strove to promote Baker as an exemplar of vigorous American boyhood, an eternal youth performing tricks from a vanishing frontier (See Illustration 7).

Interestingly, aside from Baker, and Cody himself, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’s most notable crack shots were girls. Annie Oakley immediately comes to mind. Perhaps the most famous of all the show’s attractions, Oakley was certainly no anomaly. Lillian Smith was only fourteen when she began touring with Cody in 1886, billed as “The California Huntress.” The program boasted that, at seven, Smith tired of her dolls and beseeched her father for a “little rifle” (Kasper, 60). Girl sharpshooters populated other Wild West shows as well. Their youth and connection to nature were routinely emphasized, as in this description of Smith, rechristened as “Winsome Wenona, The Wonder Woman Shot of the World” when she traveled with Pawnee Bill’s Wild West show in 1904. In the program, Wenona is described as a “charming child of nature, reared among the birds, wooed to sleep by the lullabies of sparkling streams...” a girl who “grew to be a great shot before she was a grown child. When she was very young her father presented to her—to her great joy—a small rifle...” Soon, “no bird or beast

could escape her unerring aim.” As *Shooting and Fishing Magazine*’s Old Man describes, Wenona’s connection to nature acts, paradoxically, as prelude to her eventual mastery of it; the very birds that she was “reared among” are helpless in the face of her emergent hunting prowess. Publicity photos posed these girls sharpshooters in nature—much like staged photos of Johnny Baker—further emphasizing this connection (See Illustrations 8 and 9).

The emphasis on youth was crucial for female sharpshooters. Annie Oakley felt the pressure of competing with Lillian Smith not only on account of her shooting skills but also her age—Oakley was eleven years older than Smith. As Sherl Kasper explains, Annie Oakley managed her image carefully, so that the “short skirts, the loving kisses she blew, the way she ran lightly into the arena and gave a little kick on the way out endeared Annie to the public as a kind of schoolgirl-next-door, full of life and vigor.” Threatened by Smith, Oakley simply “lopped six years off her age” and presented herself to the public as “a youthful girl of twenty again” (Kasper, 61).

The presence of these girl sharpshooters offered a clear challenge to conventional gender types, complicating rhetoric like the Old Man’s that posited the wild as a space of natural boyhood. At the same time, *Wild West* shows exercised equally clear checks on this challenge. Kasper points out that Annie Oakley and other female sharpshooters made sure to balance their shooting skills with the trappings of proper and respectable femininity. As both a young girl and a respectable feminine figure, this line of reasoning contends, Oakley could temper the transgressive potential of her performance. To an even greater degree, this emphasis on youth is what kept sharpshooters like Oakley and Smith from challenging conventional gender norms. Teresa Jordan argues that, unlike the

cowboy, who functions as “the quintessential man--most of us see the *cowgirl* as a child who will grow up someday and be something else” (xxii). The same logic held for the female sharpshooter. Her mastery of the gun was admirable but temporary, not a stepping-stone to the future but the embodiment of an alluring and carefree present.

On another level, the prominent role of these girl sharpshooters may actually have helped re-enforce the rhetoric of the frontier as a male-dominated space. Writing about mid-century frontier drama, Kim Marra describes the stage as a symbolic frontier space. Beyond the pale of respectable civilization,” as Marra puts it, the stage provided a place where representations of the wild could be projected, processed, and consumed. In this space, Marra contends, the male theatre manager could engage in the symbolic “escape from domestic tyranny and opportunity, through conquest of savagery embodied in actresses, to shed the skin of his European heritage and become an American man” (57). By civilizing the “wild” or “savage” actress on the stage, the male manager-actor re-enacted the civilizing process of the scout on the frontier. Focusing on popular theatre manager Augustin Daly, Marra describes his tactics for dealing with overly emotional actresses as notable in this regard; “Rather than quell actresses’ exciting displays of fervid emotionalism,” Marra claims, Daly “endeavored initially to manipulate and deploy such displays as his own creations in order to impress more respectable audiences with his mastery of nature in all its savage beauty” (60).

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West demonstrates the progression of frontier theatre into a multi-dimensional performance spectacle, and his use of female sharpshooters can be seen as minor variation on the process Marra describes with Daly. In the show, the poise and control of Annie Oakley and her peers demonstrated the control scouts like Cody

exerted over the space of the West itself. In this regard, Annie Oakley stands in sharp contrast to a very different female icon of the time, Calamity Jane. It was all well and good for a woman like Annie Oakley to practice marksmanship, but the question of a female scout or frontierswoman of a kind with Buffalo Bill was out of the question. Jane, the most prominent such figure, was often described as a fallen woman and social outcast. Speaking to the press after she had passed away, Cody noted, “Calamity was a character—an odd one,” going on to describe her as “unique among women so far as I know. Perhaps this is just as well,” Cody muses, “but Calamity Jane had nearly all the rough virtues of the old west as well as many of the vices” (Calamity Jane).

Annie Oakley, and other girl sharp shooters, made sure to steer clear of such associations. In their dress and demeanor, they strove to project an image of childish innocence, a connection to untrammelled nature manifest through their remarkable aptitude with guns. Oakley, as Sherl Kasper puts it, “was more than a sharpshooter, she was an actress.” In the arena, she effected a “little-girl charm” and “drew the audience in with her expressions and her movements,” feigning kicks of disappointment over a missed shot or pouting with her hands on her hips (45). In her public persona, Oakley balanced free-spirited and vivacious girlhood with restrained and respectable womanhood. Advertised as Miss Annie Oakley, she kept her marriage to manager Frank Butler quiet, paving the way—at least indirectly—for a number of spontaneous marriage proposals from her fans (Kasper, 76-77). At the same time, Oakley made sure to avoid untoward associations with members of the opposite sex, including other Wild West performers. On a night when the bulk of the troupe went on a “midseason binge” of drinking, Kasper reports that Oakley was one of the few to abstain. None of the

cowboys, Oakley boldly claimed, ever “made a remark to me which they would not make to an 8-year old child” (qtd in Kasper, 50).

Positioned between childhood and adulthood, between frisky and innocent, these girls occupied a highly restrictive space marked by its liminality. This may help to explain Lillian Smith’s much shorter tenure with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Edward Goodman, William Cody’s young nephew, traveled with the show from 1886-1887. Writing to his mother, he explains Lillian Smith’s omission from a picture he’d sent home. Smith, he writes, was not in the picture because “she is not liked by any of the carnys, she thinks her self so much better than any one else and she will no associate with Johnnie [Baker] & I so we don’t give a darn” (Letter). Unlike Oakley, Smith struggled to achieve the difficult balance required of the girl sharpshooter, a balance between deferential and audacious, between exuberance and self-restraint. That balancing act reinforces the gender differences implicit in the show’s construction of children, guns and nature. These girls were not future pioneers—or certainly not soldiers—but rather proof of how the frontier celebrated American youth through different ideations of the frontier. For boys, this process facilitated their development from rugged boyhood to superior masculinity; for girls, the process was transitory, ultimately, it strengthened their affiliation with the land through the civilizing of the savage, the cultivating of the wild.

2. Young Indian Performers Forced to Play Many Roles

In many ways, Cody and his partners in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West positioned the child of the frontier, whether Johnny Baker or Annie Oakley, as prototypical romantic children, ennobled by their deep connection to the land of the frontier (Oakley, for her part, never traveled west of the Mississippi until doing so with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West).

This emphasis becomes even more pronounced in the show's publicity for its young Indian performers. In his 1895 release, Burke invokes Wordsworth himself in describing these performers: "**That the boy is father of the man**, is not more truly exemplified than in the case of the Indian boy. Lithe and active and fearless as young panthers, they vault on the bare backs of their ponies and with a vim and go, which no artificial system could inculcate." Part boy, part panther, the young Indian presents, like Johnny Baker, a vision of emerging masculinity that only the "real" struggles and hardships of life on the frontier can produce. Unlike Baker, of course, the Indian boy lacks restraint, his inner savagery leaving him ever "active and fearless," reacting from a place of pure animal impulse rather than Victorian self-mastery. Like the frontier actresses Kim Marra describes, these savage youth stand in for the frontier itself, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West manages to contain their savagery, in fact, to manipulate it for performance, which is meant to represent the success of white masculinity in taming those open spaces.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West drew on ideations of Indian child-savagery in various ways. In the arena, Indian youth were not only fearless and powerful; they could be openly hostile and aggressive, taking part in attacks on the Deadwood stage or the assault on a settler's cabin. Outside the arena, these same youth were key players in the show's persistent reproduction of frontier domesticity. In this way, the performance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West was not limited to what transpired in the arena; rather, the performance commenced as soon as the traveling members of the show disembarked from the train. Everywhere Buffalo Bill's Wild West played, a "real-life" frontier village was erected, where Cowboys, Cossacks, and Indians alike all pitched their tents and settled in. Though they impersonated several different tribes in the arena, the native performers in

Cody's show were almost all Sioux. In the Indian camp, these performers were presented without any tribal affiliation in a generic "Indian" setting. Their tipis proved a source of great fascination, with people flocking to see Indian men, women, and children living in their "natural" environment.

Especially during the show's long runs, where these "Indian Camps" were set up for weeks at a time, the everyday performance of Indian domesticity proved a defining feature of the Wild West experience for the thousands of visitors who flocked to the show. As Philip Deloria describes them, the encampments served as a counterpoint to the violence Indian warriors performed in the arena. "If the arena seemed a place of masculine conflict and domination," Deloria explains, "the camp was, like the newly pacified reservations, domesticated, with women and children visible and tipis well tended" (65). These two facets of the show existed in interaction with one another, establishing, as Deloria puts it "a constant dialogue" between arena and camp, "with the real of the backstage being fed into the performance's imaginative universe" (65).

Certainly, reporters made much of this "authentic Indian life," and their investigations of the encampments around the show inevitably focused on Indian domesticity and the Indian child. In an 1894 account, one New York City reporter describes an anthropological interest in going "down to Ambrose Park in the morning when the little Indians feel they are unnoticed to watch them play their games just as if they were in their native villages." The reporter describes how "Lizzy Spotted Tail, 5, and her sister Many Eagle, who is 3, build a miniature wigwam, like the tent they live in, and play with dolls. While a "New-York girl wouldn't think much of these dolls, with their bodies of buckskin and beads for eyes and nose and mouth marked with black

paint,” the reporter asserts that these toys are “without a flaw” for the “little Indian girl” (Indian Children’s Ways). In fact, the comparison with the “New York girl” reassures readers that these young Indian girls play much as their own girls do, while, at the same time, unaware their dolls “aren’t much,” they’re essentially harmless. These “simple” and peaceful Indian girls confirm, then, the child’s universal instinct for play and the potential of these children for assimilation in white American civilization.

This narrative of assimilation played a great role in the popularity of Cody’s Indian performers. As Deloria describes it, much of the Wild West’s main appeal emerged from the show’s ability to “manage the tensions created as older stories of violent contest gave way to a new understanding that frontiers had closed and Indians had been—and become—pacified” (63). Both in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, and broader American culture, these narratives of pacification were tempered by concepts of age. In his memoir, Charley O’Kieffe describes going to Rushville, Nebraska, in 1890 to witness Sioux performers in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West head out of the season. O’Kieffe, eleven at the time, describes the impressive sight of the performers dancing before departure. They “were not paid to perform—they wanted to do it, and there was spirit and fire in every movement they made” (112-13). When the troupe returns to Rushville, many of the town’s youth stayed up until 5 in the morning to see them. O’Kieffe, for one, was sorely disappointed. “Here were the Indians whom we had last seen in war paint and feathers now clad in Prince Albert coats, Stetson hats, patent leather shoes, and all the accouterments of the well-dressed man of the period.” Having left “filled with good advice,” he reports, “now they were full of bad whiskey.” Departing with “all they

owned on their backs or in their hands, now they were returning with more useless junk than they could carry (115).

O’Kieffe’s disgust at the appearance and behavior of the returning Indians reflects popular criticisms about Cody and his show. Many social reformers thought of Wild West shows as anathema to the very prospect of successful Indian assimilation. As L.G. Moses points out, no sooner had “Indians begun performing in Wild West shows than protests began to reach the Indian office asking that the practice cease” (32). Throughout the tenure of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, and especially after the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, Cody and his partners consistently struggled to obtain permission to remove Indians from the reservation and take them on the road. In fact, these difficulties account, at least in part, for the expanding role of the Rough Riders of the World in the Wild West in the 1890s; fearing Indians would not be given permission to leave the reservation, Nate Salsbury pushed the Rough Riders as a feasible alternative, in the event Show Indians couldn’t be procured.

In the eyes of many reformers, the life of the Show Indian was degrading and deceitful; it prevented him from breaking with the past and delayed his acceptance of civilized America as a viable future. At the same time, reformers argued, Wild West shows rehashed damaging clichés about the Indians and their way of life for an already ignorant general public. On both fronts, Wild West shows were seen as an impediment to progress. Thomas Jefferson Morgan, who became the commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1889, was a powerful proponent of this perspective, arguing, “when the lowest type of Indian, with his war dances, paint and blankets is exhibited the public mind accepts him as typical of the Indians of today” (qtd. in Moses, 73). For Morgan, the

“lowest” type of Indian is one who challenged the reservation system and chose to exhibit himself for profit. He explicitly denies these performers any sense of agency or any ability to self-actualize. Implicitly, he posits younger performers as the most at-risk; forced to take part in these regressive exhibitions, these children are at great danger of learning the wrong lessons about the past and harboring distorted visions of the future.

O’Kieffe’s memoir reflects the generational splits suggested by Morgan’s remarks. While he’s disgusted by the adult Indians in Cody’s show, corrupted by the fineries of modern living, his encounter, six years later, with a quartet of young Sioux returning to the Pine Ridge reservation from the Carlisle school inspires a different reaction⁴. O’Kieffe describes the group as “a fine looking young man and three young women far too well dressed and refined in appearance to be called squaws by any decent white man.” After talking with the group, he concludes they “were now well-educated young people, and impressed me as amply equipped to take their place in any community as useful and responsible citizens” (145). When it came to the adults returning from a season with Cody’s Wild West, nice clothing and refined manners suggested degradation. For these youth, however, similar trappings signify education and respectability. Unlike the older generations of the tribe, these younger Sioux are primed for assimilation into the white man’s world, ready to take their places as “useful” citizens.

The Indian Camp in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was a place where narratives and performances of pacification and assimilation played out on a daily basis. Visitors who witnessed the domestic scenes in the camps came away with the sense that “real” Indians were peaceful, cooperative, and fully capable of assimilating into American society, proof that the Indian need not be pitied (he could make a living as a performer) or feared

(as his warlike ways had been reduced to harmless play-acting). The child performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West played a key role in this process, even if their role in the arena was a minor one; older boys took place in the Indian races, on horseback and foot, while younger children served as extras in scenes dramatizing authentic "Indian life." The children played a more pivotal role performing off stage, through their display in the camps or even marching in the show's public parades.

The assimilation scripts projected onto Indian performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West were inflected by gender as well as age. For instance, the reporter who visited Ambrose Park in 1890 offers a strongly gendered reading of Indian children's behavior. He points out that Johnnie Burke No Neck, "ten years old and "quite a brave" judges the girls' "childish amusement as rather beneath him." Burke, the reporter describes, teams up with two boys, Seven Up and Little Money "to throw the bola, the weapon of the South American Gaucho" and then, after assembling some chairs, to "perform some wonderful feats of horsemanship after the Cossack style." Unlike the Indian girls, the play of these boys contains a hint of danger. The "thing dearest to them is playing war," the reporter claims, wryly noting "there are not enough of them at Ambrose Park for a good game, but they have played it often at home." In an extended description of this game, the reporter reveals an interesting mix of anxiety and amusement:

First these small warriors put paint of their bodies and arm themselves with little bows, arrows, and shields, which they have made for the occasion. Then they select two chiefs, who are supposed to be leaders of hostile tribes. The war dance comes next. One of them plays on the tom-tom, while the others sing in a strange tone and gives vent now and then to savage yells. Scouts are sent out, and at last the fight begins. There are fierce charges. The air becomes thick with flying arrows and braves are falling on every side.

In this description, the Indian's warlike behavior is a central part of his essential nature. The reporter goes on to note "early in the lives of Indian children, games are put aside and life begins in earnest." For the boys, it's suggested, that life involves war; reassuringly, this playful re-enactment features two tribes facing off against each other rather than a confrontation between Whites and Native Americans. The still real threat of that shadow conflict becomes more notable when considering that Johnnie No Neck Burke had, himself, survived just such a battle three years earlier.

As Wild West publicity materials proudly attested, Johnnie was one of two survivors of the Wounded Knee Massacre, on December 29, 1891.⁵ Subsequently adopted by show publicist Johnny Burke and the Sioux performer No Neck, the boy soon found himself a participant in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Burke accompanied the show to England in 1891-2, and, as Alan Gallop describes it, he played "an active part in the show that year and his cheerful manner and winning smile make him a firm favourite with audiences all over England" (163). For the show's audience, both domestic and abroad, the younger Burke suggested the possibility of successful Indian assimilation. Publicly adopted by Burke, a prominent white man and No Neck, a respectable Standing Rock leader, the boy became a potent symbol of "an Indian future made possible by Indian partnership with a great white father figure" (Deloria, 64).

These readings of young Indian performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West also fit neatly into contemporary rhetoric on child development. The Child Study movement arose in the second half of the nineteenth century as a growing number of European and American pedagogues sought to apply the emerging principles of evolutionary science to the study of child development. As James Sully described it, this "modern science is

before all things historical and genetic, going back to the beginnings of things...so as to understand the later and more complex phases of things as the outcome of these beginnings” (4-5). In his 1877 article, “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant,” Charles Darwin offers a representative sample of this modern science in action. Through close observation of his son, Darwin traces the development of the child to the adult and of the human species itself. After visiting the zoo with his two year old son, Doddy, Darwin notes that the boy “enjoyed looking at all the animals which were like those he knew,” while he “was much alarmed at the various larger animals in houses.” Darwin suggests such fears “quite independent of experience, are the inherited effects of real dangers and abject superstitions during ancient savage times” (2). Somewhat confusingly, this seems to cut against Darwinian theory of evolution as it later came to be understood. However, as Claudia Castañeda explains, that theory, which distinguishes carefully between evolution and development, held less sway in the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time, Herbert Spencer’s ideas of evolution were more persuasive—even, it appears, to Darwin himself—and those ideas “used individual development as the basis for human evolution, and narrated both as a progressive story” (21).

Spencer’s theories clearly influenced American psychologist G. Stanley Hall in the formulation of his own developmental paradigm during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Updating Ernst Haeckel’s theory of recapitulation, famously distilled in the phrase, “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” Hall suggested that the child’s inner savagery held the key to understanding humanity’s past and imagining its future.⁶ British psychiatrist James Crichton Browne had warned parents to “remember that children are not little nineteenth-century men and women, but diamond editions of very

remote ancestors, full of savage whims and impulses, and savage rudiments of virtue” (qtd in Shuttleworth, 40). Hall took things further, believing the child’s essential link to the savage provided a golden opportunity to maximize development of both the individual and the species. “In play,” Hall claimed, “every mood and movement is instinct with heredity.” Through these moods and movements, boys “rehearse the activities of our ancestors, back we know not how far” (*Youth*, 74). Through such rehearsal, Hall believed, the play of the individual could advance the progress of the species.

Particularly interested in the development of boys, Hall argued for allowing them to fully indulge savage whims. By doing so, he maintained, the boy increased his potential to develop into an ideal specimen of manhood. That specimen was, of course, white, as the inherently racist dimensions of Hall’s recapitulation theory dictated he must be. As savages, all boys may have been equal. As potential men, each boy could only develop to the limits imposed by their species. Hall’s theory created a hierarchy of race and the young Indian performers in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West were at the bottom of that hierarchy and destined to stay there.

3. Opportunities for Agency

Read both as savage reenactment and assimilationist progress, the play of these young Indians raises intriguing questions about performance and agency. Were the boys simply reproducing Wild West scripts they saw enacted all around them? Were they performing hybridity in some way, mixing these frontier narratives with their own play scripts? In some ways, the conflicting cultural impulses embedded in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West gave Indian performers opportunities to exercise agency. Lucy Maddox points out

that many white Americans first encountered Indian people “through the medium of performance, and for many American Indians, the only way of representing themselves to white Americans was through performance” (71). As such, Show Indians had a certain freedom in choosing how to represent themselves. In the arena, the (mostly) white audience learned about “authentic” Indian dress and behavior from the Indians themselves. These performers could then, as Joy Kasson puts it, “enjoy a joke when Sioux performed Omaha dances, or understand subversive monologue when Kicking Bear recited his deeds in Lakota” (212). The degree of this subversion may have been limited, but the potential for these performers to author some aspects of their performance should not be underestimated. Linda McNenly argues against reading these performances as simply “a coproduction or a blending of two representations to produce a hybrid expression.” Indian performers, she argues, were afforded the space to produce “two parallel representations.” An Indian performing as a warrior, she claims, could generate “the production of the savage warrior, and personal meanings of warrior identity” (85).

For child performers, negotiating these questions of agency and identity were more complex. At seven years old, the transition from battlefield survivor to Wild West performer must have been traumatic for Johnnie No Neck Burke. Within a few short months, he went from seeing his family wiped out by the United States Army to touring with a new family of Show Indians, working to perform and recreate scenes of Indian defeat and American conquest. Scenes, such as the one the New York reporter describes, likely reflected young Burke’s awareness that his play was a form of performance. Watching those around him, both the Indian men who dressed up as warriors for each Wild West exhibition and the women who made and peddled Sioux crafts to curious

visitors, Burke must have learned early on his job was to entertain the show's mostly white visitors, providing the cultural authenticity they so clearly hankered for, all by acting out games mirroring a massacre he had miraculously survived.

For Burke, and for other young Indian performers, the rigors of these daily performances were likely challenging. Johnnie Burke was an extreme example, one who had a grim familiarity with the fantastic scenes represented in Buffalo Bill's Wild West most of his peers could not reference. For most of these children, performing the frontier mostly involved imitating performances they grew up with, both on the stage and in the camp. Georg Simmel defines imitation "as the child of thought and thoughtlessness," claiming the act of imitation denies individuality, transferring "not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from ourselves to another" (295). For Simmel, this makes social life "a battleground," between the individual's desire to create and the desire to conform. The young Indian performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West were familiar with this battleground. Prompted to imitate authentic "Indianness," they needed to navigate conflicting narratives: the violent aggression of "Indians past" and the peaceful domesticity of "Indians present and future."

Anthropological inquiries into the Wild West's "authentic" Indian Camp prompted, promoted, and shaped these acts of mimicry. In turn, these performances did more than entertain curiosity-seekers with visions of day-to-day life on the plains. They offered an imagological exploration of the assimilated (and conquered). In their play, young Indian performers like Johnny Burke No Neck and Lizzie Spotted Tail helped imagine a generation of Indians read neither as threats to civilization or victims of the white man's brutality but, rather, as happy recipients of civilizing generosity. Johnnie

Burke No Neck may have been a young warrior in training, but this training was mere play, safely signifying that warlike braves can be rehabilitated and that the next generation of Indians would find their place within the confines of white American civilization. In 1894, when the New York reporter visited Buffalo Bill's Wild West at Ambrose Park, such reassurances were critical. While the Indian Wars were coming to a close, Wounded Knee was still a recent memory, and the notion that white America had successfully conquered the hostile "red man" was a new one. The playful exploits of Johnnie Burke No Neck and Lizzie Spotted played as important a role as the battles staged nightly in the Wild West arena in positing narratives of white American conquest and Indian rehabilitation.

In fact, reporters visiting Buffalo Bill's Wild West paid special attention to Indian children who bucked this assimilationist trend and whose misbehavior suggested some degree of threat. In 1900, a reporter visited the show, and his *Times Democrat* account is dominated by an accounting of Little Willie, described as the "only real bad, bloodthirsty Indian" the reporter came across. As described, in some detail, "Little Willie has a precocious appetite for the gore of the palefaces, and, if he wasn't watched pretty closely, would undoubtedly try his hand at scalping when he got the chance." An eight-year boy, Willie, it's noted, "can swear like a pirate and doesn't hesitate to do so when he is on the warpath." As the reporter warns, Willie "is usually on the warpath." He singles out an incident, wherein Willie, after being teased by a Cowboy from the show "calmly proceeded to sharpen a small penknife on a stone and then went for that cowboy with the evident intention of cutting his heart out." On another occasion, Willie watched on as two other Indian children gave a "little white boy a ride." The reporter describes the boy

as “six years old, as fat as butter, and good nature shown all over his face.” Noting the generous nature of the Indians giving this young boy a ride, the reporter describes Little Willie reaction, as “a fierce hatred for the paleface kid filled his heart. He took up the trail...with the evident purpose of watching his opportunity to lift a golden-haired scalp when he got close enough.” Fortunately, the reader is re-assured, a “friendly chief,” intervened before said scalp could be taken, explaining to the reporter that “Little Willie heap bad boy” (Behind the Scenes).

Surely, there’s a playful side to Little Willie’s misdeeds. As the reporter describes it, he partakes in the kind of bad boy antics in which Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer and other characters from “Bad Boy” literature indulge in, antics that had become hallmarks of that genre, including books such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Thomas Baily Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy*, and William Dean Howells’s *A Boy’s Town*, informing the trope of the bad boy who grows into a good man. Of course, “playing Indian” meant something different for Tom Sawyer than it did for Little Willie. Threatening to break from the script of the assimilated next generation Indian, Little Willie’s “fierce hatred for the paleface” threatens the (newly) established social order, and his proclivity for scalping presents as anything but harmless; viewers who’d seen the scalp of the murdered Yellow Hand, which Buffalo Bill showcased prominently when touring (discussed in Chapter Three), understood this much quite well. In Little Willie, we see a different kind of Indian, one who promises hostile resistance rather than peaceful assimilation. In the reporter’s account, the intervention of Lone Bear, and the generous cooperation of the other Indian children, reassure the reader that this Indian is

an exception rather than the norm. Still, this exception was a dangerous one, a potential threat to social order clouding the prospects of successful Indian assimilation.

As these scenes suggest, public fascination with the Indians in Buffalo Bill's Wild West reveals more than a desire for entertainment. Whether inside the arena or out, Indian performances served as powerful vehicles for archiving culture. Describing the museum of Charles Wilson Peale in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Rosemarie Bank describes this process at work through the emerging trend of collecting and displaying the rare and exotic—be it a person or thing. What's significant about Peale's museum, Bank claims, is not necessarily what found its way into his collections, but, more importantly, "the normalizing process at work that locates living cultures in monuments to the inanimate and hierarchizes them with extinct species" (42). In the first half of the nineteenth century, Peale's museum incorporated performative aspects to his exhibitions, including public lectures and technological demonstrations, and his museum became an early vehicle for "the transference of cultural 'archiving' from museums and galleries to performance" (42-3). Through this process, Indian cultural objects became increasingly popular, and the dominant culture increasingly called on the live bodies of Indians themselves to reposition these living people as objects of history. This notion of performance as archive went on to flourish in P.T. Barnum's museum and in George Catlin's live exhibitions of "authentic" Indian culture. Before the Civil War, Bank argues, these exhibitions imposed order on "the natural world according to the 'scientific' principles that informed it." Those scientific principles fixed the Indian in a state of primitivism and promoted his status as an historical artifact. After the Civil War, this

process intensified in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and Cody staged familiar scenes, such as the attack on the Deadwood Stage as "living history."

In this way, Buffalo Bill's Wild West complicates the relationship between the archive and repertoire as cultural forms. Diana Taylor describes the archive as a set of "supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)," distinguishing it from "the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)" (19). In Cody's staging of Indian performance—as in Catlin's and Peale's—embodied practice does the work of Taylor's archive, inscribing performances of acting and dancing as "enduring materials." In this way, Buffalo Bill's Wild West reveals archive and repertoire to be, as Robin Bernstein describes them, more "a model of interaction, or even of cooperation" ⁷(12). Although Cody's Show Indians were living, their performances of Indian life attested to their own extinction.

Rehearsing sham battles in the arena or day-to-day life "on the plains" in the Indian Camp, young Indians reproduced cultural scenes with which they likely had little direct experience. As such these performers accessed history as much through revival as through recollection. Foregrounding her work on cultural revivals, such as Renaissance Fairs, Wendy Griswold argues "archive and activity, or what is saved and what is done are two aspects of the same cultural system" (6). In reviving culture, the performer has access to both, so that unlike the older generations of Show Indians, these child performers were able to perform history as personal while reflecting on the personal as a form of conscious imitation. This potentially enabled younger performers to use performance to frame and assess their cultural identity, both in the past and the present, with heightened levels of awareness.

The children working in Buffalo Bill's Wild West left behind few records of their experience as performers—this is especially true in the case of the Indian performers—and the accounts they did generate seldom cast light on the rigors of negotiating identity through performance. Certainly, these young performers became aware of how their “Indian culture” was processed and presented through the lens of a mass culture at a very young age. Rose Nelson was the daughter of John Nelson, the famous scout and infamous squaw man who enjoyed a long tenure with Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Jenny Lone Wolf Nelson, daughter of the Sioux Chief Smoke.⁸ In 1887, Rose and her family traveled with the Wild West to England at the age of seven, where her precocious behavior—including failing to curtsy for Queen Victoria and slapping the Prince of Wales—made her a darling with the British press. Buffalo Bill christened her Princess Blue Waters, in honor of her Atlantic crossing, and photographers prized her image (Princess Blue Waters).

In cabinet cards sold at the show, Rose was billed as the “Pet of the Sioux.” In one popular image, she is carefully posed on a bench over a carpet, an animal skin beneath her feet. Carefully groomed and elegantly dressed in Native costume, she's presented as every bit the Indian Princess, signifying her distinctive status as a union of the “savage” and civilized (See Illustration Ten). The interior location of the shot is somewhat unusual. Even in staged interiors, Indian performers were typically posed in a “natural” setting, as in the cabinet card of White Fawn and her papoose (See Illustration Eleven).

Rose Nelson's photo also stands in stark contrast to what, at first glance, appears to be a more candid shot of a group of Indian children from Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In this undated photo, the children are still dressed to reflect the highly gendered nature of

Indian performance, with the girls clad in simple dresses and the boys appearing as young warriors in feathered headdresses.⁹ Intriguingly, the figure at the bottom right of this group disrupts the unity of the image, dressed in a beaded vest, she stares at the viewer brandishing a drum in one hand and a tiny (toy?) revolver in the other (See Illustration Twelve). Did she choose this pose herself? Was she, like the others dressed this way for effect?

These questions remain unanswerable. In these off-stage photographs, Louis Warren points out, Indians “frequently put on cowboy gear,” gear that, in fact many of them had donned when working for livestock ranchers on the Great Plains (407). The children in this group photo may have chosen to dress this way. More likely parents or other adults dressed them; Luther Standing Bear suggests this was standard practice, describing the great pleasure other Indians took in dressing his young son to perform in the arena (Standing Bear, 266). Perhaps, the young girl brandished the gun in imitation of performers she saw, but there’s no way to be certain.

In at least one instance, though, Cody and his partners considered blending the tropes of “Cowboy” and “Indian” more formally. Bennie Irving was the son of Wild West translator “Bronco” Bill Irving and his Sioux wife, Ella Bissonett. Like Rose Nelson, he was part of one of the show’s celebrated squaw families, and, like Rose, he was singled out for exhibition on his own. Billed—and photographed—as “the smallest cowboy in the world,” Bennie was featured in full cowboy regalia, pistol tucked into his waste band and lasso in hand (See Illustration Thirteen). During the show’s European tour, Irving actually performed this role in the arena.¹⁰

The blurring of racial lines was not unusual in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, certainly not for Cody's Indian performers. For instance, they routinely stood in for other groups, such as the (similarly degraded) Chinese in the Wild West's 1901 depictions of scenes from the Boxer Rebellion. In some cases, Indian performers appeared in the ring as cowboys, and, more interestingly, Louis Warren suggests Rose Nelson and her siblings may have, at times, played white children in Buffalo Bill's Wild's West's most dramatic scene, "The Attack on the Settler's Children" (404-7). This kind of flexibility, allowing Rose Nelson to move through a handful of identities, from a typical child in to the Indian village, to the Indian Princess and "pet of the Sioux" and, even, to a white pioneer child, likely influenced Nelson's understanding of the ways performance shaped identity, and more importantly, how such performance could be employed in ways that facilitated agency.

For Indian child performers, that agency was clearly limited. At the same, younger performers proved more adept than previous generations at navigating the commercialization of their identities. Rose, for her part, went on to study art and music at the Franklin Institute and appeared in several Hollywood movies (*Remembering Princess Blue Waters*). She, like other Indian performers, had little control over her image and did not prosper from the sale of cabinet cards at or around Buffalo Bill's Wild West.¹¹ As an adult, though, Nelson clearly became capable of managing—and profiting from—her performed self. Luther Standing Bear, who toured with the show as a translator in 1903, also developed a nuanced perspective on the opportunities—and lack thereof—offered by the life of a Show Indian, and his long and storied life provides

numerous insights into the ways Indian childhood became freighted with ideations of assimilation and the possibilities of identity and performance.

Unlike many of his peers, Luther Standing Bear recorded his insights in five books, starting with *My People the Sioux*, published in 1928. At eleven, and then named Plenty Kill, he became a student at the Carlisle School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Renamed Luther, he quickly proved one of the school's brightest students. Still, if Luther Standing Bear took to his studies, and even followed the assimilationist logic undergirding Carlisle's educational philosophy, he maintained a clear and critical perspective on the school's attempts to transform his identity. After getting his hair cut, Standing Bear describes feeling "that I was no more an Indian, but would be an imitation of a white man." He goes on to note "we are still imitations of white men, and the white men are imitations of the Americans" (141). The perception that late nineteenth century notions of racial and national identity were questions of performance is a keen one, and, certainly, Luther Standing Bear and his peers at the Carlisle School had plenty of opportunities to form such perceptions.

Standing Bear likely had more opportunities than most. He was often selected as one of the school's model citizens, and, in 1883, at 17, was sent with one other boy to work at Wannamaker's department store. While there, he learned that Sitting Bull was on a speaking tour and would be appearing in Philadelphia. Attending the show, Standing Bear records disgust at the purported white translator's misrepresentations and lies. In Standing Bear's recollection, Sitting Bull's speech was one of reconciliation and appeasement, wherein he declared, "there is no use fighting any more." In the mouth of the translator, the speech became a retelling of the battle at Little Big Horn, with Sitting

Bull falsely described as the man who killed Custer. “He told so many lies that I had to smile,” Luther Standing Bear remembers (185), before wondering “what sort of people the whites were anyway. Perhaps they were glad to have Custer killed, and were really pleased to shake hands with the man who had killed him!” (186).

These flourishes show Standing Bear to be well versed in negotiating Indian performance for rhetorical effect. His book, after all, is an act of performance itself, written for a largely white audience in 1928 America. In 1893, though, the young Standing Bear was clearly learning what white audiences wanted from Indian performers. A few weeks after his visit to Sitting Bull, he describes another troupe of Sioux Indians who came to Philadelphia. “Of course I went to see them,” he recalls. The show consisted of a group of men with their wives and children. These performers had no interpreter and “were shown in a little side-show, on a small stage.” As he watches, Standing Bear notes the “children had a little box down in front of the stage into which people would drop coins. Then the Indians would shake hands with them” (188).

Standing Bear, himself, did not join Buffalo Bill’s Wild West until 1903, when he accompanied the show as an adult interpreter. However, his early experiences likely shaped his approach to Indian performance. When his wife gave birth to a child during Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’s stay in England, Standing Bear consented to Cody’s request to exhibit the infant in the sideshow. “It was a great drawing card for the show,” Standing Bear reports, noting “before she was twenty–four hours old she was making more money than my wife and I together” (266).

Unlike the men of his father’s generation, Luther Standing Bear had been exposed at an early age to various kinds of Indian performance, from his time at Carlisle to his

brief stint with Buffalo Bill's Wild West. His perceptive insight that racial and national identities are, in their essence, sites of contested meanings, and that these meanings are mediated largely through performance—both formal and informal—likely influenced his decision to exhibit his daughter for profit and, later, to become an author and an actor in several Hollywood films. And while Standing Bear didn't travel with Buffalo Bill's Wild West as a child, his own son did. As his father describes it, the younger Luther enjoyed standing outside the tipi, where “the English-speaking people would crowd around to shake his hand and give him money” (266).

4. Blurring the Line Between Performer and Audience

It's impossible to be certain what the Indian children traveling with the children thought about their role as performers. Certainly the accounts we do have of these young performers disrupt the notion of cultural archiving as purely a top down process. If Buffalo Bill's Wild West presented a cohesive and persistent narrative of white civilization triumphing over Indian savagery, the interactions of child performers in and around the show suggest a more fractured, less monolithic, set of interpretations. In practice, they more closely resemble Robin Bernstein's conception of the repertoire. As Bernstein explains it, “a repertoire is by definition in constant flux, always being re-made. These re-formations occur with the exercise of agency as well as accidentally, on a small scale, through authored and unauthored elements” (14).

By its very nature, Buffalo Bill's Wild West's dominant narrative of white American progress was unauthored, a narrative filtered through the broad dimensions of Buffalo Bill's life story. That story lived not only in performances of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, or even, solely through Cody's telling. Manifest in countless other literary

productions, Wild West shows, toys, promotional materials and newspaper accounts, this frontier narrative worked actively as a repertoire. That narrative functioned, as Bernstein describes the repertoire, as “a formation of influence and cross-influence that is internally contentious and surprisingly tightly woven without ever becoming unified” (14).

Imagined through a broad array of diffuse cultural genres, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West allowed a range of social actors to refract and reform this frontier narrative. In fact, the Wild West relied on this flexibility, allowing actors and audience to tap into the collective fantasy Eric Lott describes as the root appeal of all influential popular culture.

The young performers in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West grew up keenly aware of their role in this process. As Little Willie’s antics suggest, their ability to openly challenge the show’s scripted realities was limited. Nonetheless, Indian children were a source of fascination for white spectators, and as we see from Rose Nelson and Luther Standing Bear, some young Indian performers found opportunity to manipulate their performances to suit their own needs. According to Nelson’s grand-daughter, Marirose Nelson, Rose Nelson fully understood “the show’s narrative was bogus” but was able to use that vehicle for self-empowerment; “she enjoyed having people treat her as a peer and letting them know she felt she was a peer if not more” (American Icons). The young performers in Buffalo Bill’s West didn’t all enjoy Nelson’s notoriety did, but they had openings to exercise agency within the show’s master narrative.

Most of these opportunities probably surfaced outside of the arena. The Indian children engaged in daily performances of the domestic in the Indian Camp, performances that were highly interactive. Curious onlookers flocked to the show, mingling with the Indian families and performing with them. This was especially true of

the many young boys who came to Cody's Wild West show to visit their hero. As the *New York Sun* declared in 1894, Buffalo Bill's Wild West had a hypnotic effect on the "small boy," who "wakes up the family by uttering weird coyote yells in his sleep. He lassoes bedpost and the family cat, and fires a toy pistol at imaginary objects while riding the back fence at full speed" (Girls). Crowding the arena, these boys echoed the "gallery gods" in attendance for the shows once put on by Buffalo Bill's Combination. The boys waited patiently for Cody's arrival in the arena, and when he arrived, "how they did yell! The old scout took off his hat and bowed to his little friends. They took off their hats and heaved them, they cared not where" (Buffalo Bill, Old Glory).

The rapturous enthusiasm of the boys spilled out of the arena into city streets, at times becoming a public nuisance—even, in some cases, to the show's Indian families. The *Boston Daily Globe* concluded that Indian wariness of the White Man "is readily understood, after witnessing how his life was made miserable all day yesterday by the juveniles of Boston." These young acolytes of Cody:

invaded the tents of the show almost as thickly as ants in a cracker barrel, poked their heads beneath the canvas of the Indian wigwams, followed the occupants in droves whenever they moved outside, even invading the dining tent where the meals were served, most of the time keeping up a discordant chorus of wild war whoops, that were probably all the more exasperating for their fidelity to nature (Gazed Upon).

Notably, this fidelity to nature marks the boys as even more savage the Indian occupants of the village. Accessing their inner savage, as G. Stanley Hall described it, the boys "Play Indian" better than the Indians themselves. In both cases, the Indians performing peaceful domesticity and the white boys performing the primitive, social expectations are simultaneously inverted and confirmed.

These intrusions represent more than the rambunctious misdeeds of boys being boys, even if that's exactly how the reporters describing these scenes attempted to frame them. All told, the stories of these children, playing, acting, and performing in the diffuse and myriad ways facilitated by Buffalo Bill's Wild West suggest a more nuanced estimation of American identity formation in the final decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century than the show is typically given credit for. As Kathryn White argues, Buffalo Bill's Wild West opened avenues where "people of many classes, backgrounds and even races could transmit, contemplate, discuss, and absorb a wide array of "American" ideals, extending beyond the immediate issue of the assimilation and the identity of Indians." In White's analysis, the show functioned as a "drawing table" where a variety of perspectives interacted in an ongoing negotiation about "what it meant to be an American in a heterogeneous country where regional, racial, religious, and class differences seemed insurmountable" (35).

Children's perspectives and experiences played a large, if to this point largely unrecognized role in the process. In this regard, White relates story of a Wild West performance featuring an audience of 4,000 New York area orphans. Cody and his partners frequently staged such events, and Cody, in particular, took great pains to provide orphans and other poor children with access to his show. During this performance, the children in attendance took great delight at the unscripted performance of "an Indian child who snatched a cartridge off of the ground and proceeded to hurl it at his elders." In this moment, White argues, the child spectators identified "with someone with whom they shared a common culture, that of childhood and its values," and through

that identification, “the children experienced the liminal space between non-shared cultures, in this case, ethnic” (46).

It’s uncertain to what degree these orphan spectators and the Indian boy in the show drew on a shared “common culture” of childhood, but White’s analysis of this moment is otherwise instructive. The child spectators delighted in the Indian Child’s performance of the unexpected. Intentionally or not, the young performer disrupts the show’s script, rejecting, to some degree, the adult authority sanctioning it. In a separate review of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, a *New York Times* reporter takes note of a little girl in the show “so restless and active that she is never still.” When in the area, he reports, “she darts daringly between the feet of the moving horses, races with flying feet where she ought not to go, and laughs derisively at the cries and scoldings of her mother” (Some Indian Characteristics).

In both instances, the child performer clearly exerts agency. If these actions don’t directly challenge the dominant narrative of white conquest and/or that of Show Indians reliving the story of that conquest through performance, they reveal child actors challenging adult authority. In such instances, as White suggests, child performer and spectator alike can work through the Wild West’s scripted realities to “shed boundaries and experience a range of possibilities” that reflected intense negotiations over competing visions of late century American identity formation (46). Returning to Simmel’s metaphor of social life as a “battleground” between the individual impulse to create or conform, we can read these as moments where performance enables autonomy and self-making and young performers channel individual performance in ways that transcend imitation and create opportunities for self-expression.

At the same time, Cody and his partners set up Buffalo Bill's Wild West in a way that actually—if incidentally—helped facilitate such moments. The literature produced to promote the Wild West, both the programs produced by the show and the editorials placed in newspapers, emphasize the importance of educating their young audience members through exposure to the vanishing frontier itself. What sets the Wild West apart, an 1899 program boasts, is that it's "actually a part of the romantic past it perpetuates, and vitalized by the presence of some of the most noted makers of the frontier history they illustrate." Ultimately, the show's promoters promise, "what the children see at Buffalo Bill's Wild West they will enjoy, appreciate, understand, and remember. What parents see there they will wish their children taught" (10). The power of witnessing or experiencing is presented as critical for this process. For the child spectators of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, learning took place through witnessing, and the educational value of the show was transmitted through the visceral experience of living "history."

These experiences played out both in the formal setting of the arena and the informal world of the Indian Camp. The show's child spectators fawned over heroes like Cody, Johnny Baker, or Annie Oakley, mixed with performers in the Indian Village around the show, and participated in a real life embodiment of the romantic frontier they'd read about in newspapers in storybooks. Winston Roche was born in 1898 and saw the Wild West as a small boy. "We were part of the fight," he recalled with hushed reverence in a TV interview many years later. "We were living our fantasies, our imagination. Living it out was part of the show. It was wonderful" (*Buffalo Bill*). Parker (Paddy) McGoff expresses similar feelings in a 1945 reminiscence of visiting the show as boy. He recalls "what a thrill it was for us youngsters to strut along the sidewalks in the

wake of such famous people as that great hunter and army scout, Buffalo Bill Cody, the crack rifle shots Annie Oakley and Johnny Baker,” remembering, also, his efforts to “strive manfully to imitate the walk of fun-seeking cowboys as they head for McCormick’s Wild West Hotel up on 3rd Avenue.” McGoff also remembers the kind of unscripted play facilitated by the show’s presence in Brooklyn, with the performers camped out alongside the city streets. “Later on, as the older folks were doing a bit of trading with show folks,” McGoff and his friends “mingled with and made friends with the younger occupants of the show grounds and in no time at all we had two of the Arab boys joining us in our games of pah (leapfrog).”

Unfortunately, much of the play McGoff describes fails to appear in records of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, be it promotional materials or newspaper reviews. The few scraps that do remain suggest child spectators of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had ample opportunity to structure their own meaning from the show’s frontier narratives. As Bernstein points out children are not passive recipients of these kinds of cultural narratives. “Rather, children expertly field the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself.” Through this kind of play, she argues, cultural narratives are constantly reworked and “children collectively exercise agency” (29).

At the same time, these boyhood recollections stress the critical role of memory in the type of history “made” by Cody and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. They reemphasize that, despite the agentic potential of Wild West performance, the act of memory often worked to produce familiar tropes of masculinity, tropes that cast the Wild West’s frontier repertoire as a space where impressionable boys aspire to ideal manhood as

exemplified by cowboys and Indian scouts. Much as Cody and his fellow performers kindled their own memories of frontier living through performance, Buffalo Bill's Wild West manufactured myriad opportunities for men to engage in a similar type of nostalgia. Mark Twain saw the show twice in 1884, famously confessing to Cody that he enjoyed it immensely (Cody, xxvi). Twain took pains to commend the show for its authenticity, and in a separate letter to Cody in 1885, he connects that authenticity to memories of boyhood, noting that the feelings the show stirred in him "were identical with those wrought upon [him]...a long time ago by the same spectacles of the frontier" (qtd in White, 46). As it does for Twain, the space of boyhood then, becomes vital for nurturing a distinctive vision of frontier history. Through memories of childhood, white men like Winston Roche and Parker McGoff not only sustain the frontier as a place where history becomes myth but, also a place where mythmaking is bound inextricably to the act of memory, nostalgia, and willful self-fashioning

In effect then, like the show's young Indian performers, spectators like Roche and McGoff *became* part of the history they were witnessing. Through their visceral connection with Buffalo Bill's Wild West, through the opportunities to interact with the histories suggested by Cody and the other performers, these children revived stories of the past and gave shape to visions of the future. "America is making history faster than any country in the world," boasts an 1891 program for the show" (10). The idea of childhood, and, in particular, the figure of the boy, was a crucial vehicle for processing that history. Writing about the early days of the Child Study movement, Sally Shuttleworth demonstrates that nineteenth century child "experts" perceived children in exactly this way; "With its potentiality waiting to be unfurled," Shuttleworth argues, "the

child becomes in this view an embodiment both of all past history and an expression of future possibility” (267).

In Frederick Jackson Turner’s reading of the frontier, America was formed through a similar dialectic, with the process of the European settler encountering the frontier to engender the distinctive character of the American. As the child was for G. Stanley Hall and others, Turner’s frontier served as an embodiment both of the past and the future. For Hall and Turner alike, American progress worked through narratives of growth and development. In its conception, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West reformulated Turner’s frontier thesis as a timeless space of/for boyhood, where dominant notions of white American masculinity are produced and reproduced through frontier conquest. Certainly, the show appealed to audience members through its triumphant framing of westward expansion as a symbol of national character. At the same time, the frontier narratives embodied in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West drew their strength from flexibility as well as familiarity.

The varied actions of the child performers in and around the West reveal that flexibility at work, demonstrating the show’s familiar frontier narratives to be both promoted and contested. Featured performers like Johnny Baker and Annie Oakley presented the space of the frontier as a youth space. Girl sharpshooters like Oakley revealed a subversive strain within the show’s central narratives, even as the precisely managed nature of these performances demonstrated the desire to manage and control that strain. The cultural repertoire of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was also shaped by Indian performers, including of Rose Nelson or Bennie Irving in the arena or Little Willie and his more anarchic performances in the domestic setting of the Indian Camp. Finally, the

power of nostalgia reworked this repertoire through the fantasies of youth. In all of these guises, young performers highlighted Buffalo Bill's Wild West as a space where the self could be fashioned, paradoxically, through repeated rehearsal of a heavily fictionalized history. The figure of the child held this fragile paradox together, signaling to the boundless potential of the future recited through the increasingly diffuse and fervent recitation of the past.

Endnotes

¹ Baker's parents were apparently unwilling to let Johnny be formally adopted by Cody, though they were let him to willing to let him travel and, for the most part, live with the famous showman. See Don Russell, *Lives and Legends*, 207.

² There's a large body of work documenting the gradual articulation and increasing influence of Child Innocence and Romantic Childhood in Western culture. Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, offers an historical analysis of these themes in visual culture. Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, situates the Romantic Childhood in a concise history of American childhood. Gillian Avery, *Behold the Child*, examines tropes of Romantic Childhood in American literature.

³ *In Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, Michael Bellesiles argues that a meaningful gun culture did not exist in America prior to the Civil War. Bellesiles won the Bancroft award for this book, and, famously, was stripped of the award when the veracity of his claims and soundness of his methods came under closer inspection. James Lindgren, "Fall from Grace," offers a thorough analysis of the book and the controversy, providing a useful overview of what's known and unknown about guns in nineteenth century America.

⁴ General Richard Henry Pratt established the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879, and the boarding school quickly became an influential educational model. For an overview, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 36-59. Pratt was openly critical of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, see L.G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians*, 182, and the popular press often presented boarding schools and Wild West shows as opposing models of Indian assimilation. In a representative article from *The Brooklyn Eagle*, "A Band of Seventy Indians: Will Give a Concert at Plymouth Church Tonight," the author notes, "Captain Pratt's purpose in taking his pupils on their present tour is to show the public another than a Buffalo Bill Indian, and of course, to give an idea of the work done at the school."

⁵ Some publicity materials from Buffalo Bill's Wild West billed Johnnie Burke No Neck as the sole survivor of the Wounded Knee massacre, but it appears there was at least one other survivor. Sam Maddra, *Hostiles?*, discusses John Burke's acquisition of an infant girl from the battle, page 132. He provides additional information on the child, baptized Maggie Nailor, page 188

⁶ Haeckel was not the originator of recapitulation theory, but his ideas were the most influential for Hall and other Child Study experts. "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," meaning that the development of a single body recapitulates the development of a species, provided a critical foundation for Hall's theories of development. Stephen Jay Gould's *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* is a comprehensive cultural history of Haeckel, recapitulation theory, and its influences.

⁷ See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16-33, for more on these two forms of knowledge. See Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 8-13, for more on her response to—and adjustment of—the categories Taylor describes.

⁸ Nelson had a storied history as an Indian Scout, leading Brigham Young's Mormon party out west and later marrying the daughter of the Ogalla chief Lone Wolf, with whom he had 6 children. He was a long-tenured member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and, likely, the most famous of the Squaw Men traveling with the show. Louis Warren discusses the popular appeal of these men and their families, 402-4.

⁹ See Linda McLenly, *Native Performers in Wild West Shows*, 90-99, for analysis of Indian dress in photos from the show. As McLenly notes, performers mixed and matched freely from a variety of styles, and it's difficult to tease out the traditional from the staged.

¹⁰ While it's not clear just what he did, Bennie Irving appears to have been a featured performer for portions of the Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show's 1890 tour of Europe. In a surviving Italian program, he's listed as "Il piu piccolo cow-boy del mondo."

¹¹ Sitting Bull was a notable exception in this regard. When he toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1885, Sitting Bull successfully negotiated for the rights to choose his own interpreter and to sell his own photographs. For more on Sitting Bull's time with the show, see L.G. Moses, 27-31, and for a more in depth look at his time as a performer, 169-83.

Conclusion

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the frontier had become thoroughly enshrined as a space of white American masculinity and a proving ground for national—and individual progress. Increasingly seen as a “vanished” space, relegated to the realm of nostalgia, the frontier continued to dominate American popular culture as connections between the frontier and white masculinity became stronger. Teddy Roosevelt, the first of America’s cowboy presidents, took office in 1901, and Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* was published the following year. As Richard Etulain explains, *The Virginian*, more than any other novel, “represented a break from nineteenth century stories of an open, endless frontier.” For Wister, and for many other novelists and filmmakers that followed him, “the magic frontier had disappeared over the horizon” (77). As a twentieth century myth-making machine, the magic frontier looked quite promising. An immediate blockbuster, *The Virginian* sold over 100,000 copies in three months and went on to become a bestseller for years to come (Etulain, 68), setting the stage for decades of frontier films and TV shows, all centered on the type of solitary white masculine hero so neatly embodied by actor John Wayne.

This figure, from Teddy Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan, or the Virginian to John Wayne, dominates twentieth century frontier narratives. As film started to replace literature, and the buckskin clad Indian scout of the nineteenth century gave way to the solitary cowboy of the twentieth century, the Western became synonymous with a kind of hyper-masculinity. In the twentieth century Western, as Jane Tompkins argues, everything else recedes to the background as the Western male hero dominates the frame. In the introduction to *West of Everything*, Tompkins marvels that the twentieth century

Western features hardly any significant Indian characters. No longer about “the encounter between civilization and the frontier,” Tompkins concludes, this new Western is “about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents¹” (45).

Despite changes to the Western’s medium, and the broader culture surrounding it, frontier narratives and American boyhood continued to interact in diverse and interesting ways in the twentieth century. Two themes in particular, already existent in nineteenth century frontier narratives, became increasingly prominent in early twentieth century cultures of American boyhood. The rifle, which had played such a prominent role in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, became a fixture both as a children’s toy and a vehicle for character-building. At the same time, the specter of juvenile delinquency, looming in responses to the nineteenth century dime novel and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* alike, became a pressing social concern in the early twentieth century, one often evoked through the language of the frontier.

Starting in the late nineteenth century, new kinds of rifles helped braid ideologies of boyhood and narratives of the frontier together, promoting a model of growth and development fused to American ascendance as a world power. In 1886, Daisy introduced their air gun to the market, a year after Winchester had introduced their single shot .22 rifle, also aimed at young consumers. Also in 1885, Nate Salsbury and William Cody partnered to form Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, or, as it would bill itself in later years, “America’s National Entertainment.” In these final decades of the nineteenth century, the relationship between boys and rifles increasingly became seen as recreational, and Buffalo Bill helped enshrine the story of America’s victory in the Indian Wars firmly in

the world of child's play. The copy for a 1913 rifle ad claims to offer boys a "chance to develop character while he's having the time of his life" (See Illustration 14). Buffalo Bill's Wild West had been proving such opportunities for several decades.

In the Progressive Era, air guns became a staple of the boy's toy box, and advertisers built on the frontier narratives established by Cody and his partners. As Lisa Jacobson describes, advertising campaigns for air rifles both "dramatized anxieties about curtailed masculinity and the overfeminized home" and evoked "the cultural appeal of the savage boy" (112). Much as Cody had, both in the Wild West arena and in ads for his Cody Military College, these ads positioned the frontier as a vital space for developing boys into men, while simultaneously lamenting its disappearance in the face of encroaching modernity. Unable to access the open land of the frontier, the Progressive Era boy was urged to turn to the air rifle instead. Through this tool, these boys were able not only to play but also to develop the manly skills needed sustain the vision of vigorous American manhood exemplified by paragons of white frontier masculinity such as Cody or Roosevelt.

The 1913 Daisy ad, published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, demonstrates how the rifle worked as a character-building instrument for boys. The copy reminds mothers that when their sons ask for an air rifle, it's "the upstanding American man in him asking for a chance to grow." The idea of the man already existent in the body, waiting to grow, and being shaped by the materiality of the rifle plays on familiar themes that can be traced back to whose to 1885—if not earlier. By the end of the Progressive Era, the rifle worked through the cultures of childhood in a very consistent symbolic vocabulary. One narrative emphasized the child-hunter and the value of marksmanship, as evident in the

marksmanship programs developed by the Boy Scouts, the NRA, and The Winchester junior rifle corps. As Jay Mechling points out, these groups positioned marksmanship for boys as “an activity suitable for creating and maintaining physical fitness, mental alertness, a competitive spirit, and democratic camaraderie” (7). A second narrative emphasized the toy gun and the world of play, as seen in games like Cowboys and Indians. In fact, many boy workers and air gun manufacturers, sought to distance the skill of marksmanship from the world of play².

Of course these narratives reflect broader social and cultural trends in America. By the 1890s, the family farm—and the need for the child hunter—was greatly diminished. America was more urban, and the idea of guns in the city held multiple meanings, as seen in a sampling of ads from a 1901 edition of *The Youth's Companion*. One Smith and Wesson Ad warns against going unarmed in “business or pleasure” (363). The image of a middle-aged businessman putting a revolver in his valise suggests that respectable men take the necessary precautions to protect not only themselves but their wives and children. In the very same issue, an advertisement for the Winchester Model 1900 Rifle appears. This ad targets the boy reader directly, claiming that “for boys it is safer than most guns,” and suggesting the “rifle is just the thing to take on your summer vacation for fun and diversion” (368). While the Smith and Wesson ad gestures to the growing danger of an increasingly urbanized America, the Winchester ad invokes the new culture of leisure, and, with the young boy and his rifle posed in an open field, hearkens back to young marksmen like Johnny Baker, the child of nature hunting birds and squirrels in an idealized rural setting.

Some Progressive Era reformers saw any gun as a direct threat to children. In *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*, Jane Addams describes a confrontation between a group of boys that resulted in one boy shooting another dead. The story, Addams notes, “could be duplicated almost every morning; what might be merely a boyish scrap is turned into a tragedy because some boy has a revolver” (Chapter Four). In this fraught environment, the gun provides no value for as a character-building tool, a sentiment that became increasingly common in the twentieth century. As the century progressed, air rifles ceded prominence to guns that were clearly toys, responding to what Mechling describes as “a moral panic about adolescent boys, aggression and gun violence” (6).

That moral panic also had its roots in early twentieth century frontier discourse, particularly as it relates to fears of juvenile delinquency. As we’ve seen, the specter of delinquency haunts nineteenth century literatures of boyhood, be it *Deadwood Dick* dime novels or the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Progressive Era reformers, such as Addams, were increasingly concerned about juvenile delinquency. As an autonomous juvenile justice system emerged in beginning of the twentieth century, a number of psychologists and sociologists turned their attention to the study of delinquency³. Frederic Thrasher’s work is notable in this regard. A member of the Chicago School of Sociology, Thrasher is best known for his 1927, *The Gang: A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago*. With section headings like “The Natural History of the Gang,” Thrasher’s book assumes a tone of scientific inquiry, building on developmental paradigms established by G. Stanley Hall and other boy workers. As Thrasher describes it, the boy is instinctually drawn to the gang, and the gang itself develops almost spontaneously, anytime and anyplace boys happen to congregate. “Every village has at least its boy gang,” Thrasher

notes, and these gangs are no different than their urban counterparts, “composed of those same foot-loose, prowling and predacious adolescents who herd and hang together after the manner of the undomesticated male everywhere” (ix).

Boys and gangs form naturally then, and their ideal setting, Thrasher notes, is the frontier. “Gangs flourish on the frontier,” he argues in his introduction, a point he returns to time and again throughout the book (ix). Describing the parts of Chicago where gangs form most readily, Thrasher notes that “these regions of conflict are like a frontier; in others, like a ‘no-man’s land,’ lawless, godless, wild” (6). In his description of the city environment, Thrasher describes the urban frontier as an interstice, its physical location “pertaining to spaces that intervene between one thing and another.” The gang, he writes, “may be regarded as an interstitial element in the framework of society, and gangland as an interstitial region in the layout of the city” (22).

In Thrasher’s analysis, the vanishing frontier has become embedded in the modern city. He establishes Gangland as a function of human ecology. As residential districts recede before the encroachments of business and industry, “the gang develops as one manifestation of the economic, moral, and cultural frontier which marks the interstice” (23). While conceptions of the urban frontier were not new in 1920s—in Chapter Two, I appraise Horatio Alger’s 1867 novel *Ragged Dick* through this lens—Thrasher articulates a relationship between that frontier, boys, and gangs that would only grow more powerful in twentieth century narratives of juvenile delinquency. Language linking at-risk-youth through “urban frontiers” has since proliferated in a seemingly endless array of media reports and research studies alike, while iconographies of frontier

bad boys have become ubiquitous in popular culture, from the young adult novels, *The Outsiders*, 1967, and *Rumble Fish*, 1975, to the 1991 film *Boyz n the Hood*.

These two examples of frontier narratives interacting with discourses of boyhood scarcely exhaust the catalogue of such interactions in twentieth century America. Likewise, the preceding chapters leave much opportunity to further explore the rich relationship between these powerful ideological categories in nineteenth century America. Hopefully, this project will provide a springboard to future research that explores this promising, if largely untapped, cultural history.

Buffalo Bill's life and career straddled both centuries. Even after his death his adventures were reprinted in books and films, maintaining a vivid presence in the culture of boyhood. *The Adventures of Buffalo Bill*, adapted from Cody's autobiography, were first published in 1904 by Harper & Row and reprinted several times in the decades that followed. In a foreword to a 1965 edition of the book, the unnamed author describes Cody as "the last of that intrepid pathfinders who gave their lives to the taming of the West," a process described as finished when "the young and vigorous life of the Pacific States had been linked up for all time with the older civilization of the Atlantic seaboard" (vii). As we've seen, this collision of young and old is a long-running theme in the creation myth of America, one as present in Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis as in the iconic figure of Buffalo Bill. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the endurance of this rhetoric gestures to the dynamic interplay between the frontier and boyhood in shaping American notions of race, gender, and national identity. Attached to Cody in a 1965 book for boys, this language reminds us of the powerful resonance of this frontier mythos, now deeply embedded in our shared cultural memory.

Endnotes

¹ This folds into Tompkins's larger analysis of twentieth century as a response to women's entering the public sphere. Building off the work of Gail Bederman, and other historians, this represents a central theme in *West of Everything*. She offers a concise summary of the argument on page 44.

² I experienced this aversion to the association of guns and play firsthand during a 2015 phone interview with Daisy Vice-President of Publicity Joe Murfin. Mr. Murfin repeatedly told me he was uncomfortable associating Daisy air rifles with play and suggested using the terminology "recreational uses."

³ For more on the history of juvenile justice in America see Oliver Platt's *The Child Savers* and Eric Schneider's *In the Web of Class*. Platt's account is more theoretical, suggesting a radical reappraisal of Progressive reformers and the institutions they created. Schneider offers a more detailed accounting of juvenile justice institutions in America, from public reformatories and asylums to the first juvenile courts.

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